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UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

ICEFIELDS

BY

THOMAS WHARTON

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **MASTER OF ARTS.**

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

Edmonton, Alberta

Fall 1993

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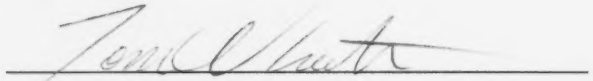

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ABSTRACT

ICEFIELDS is a novel within the frame of a tourist guidebook. It is set in a fictional Jasper, Alberta, in the early years of the twentieth century. Doctor Edward Byrne falls into a crevasse while exploring the icefield, and has a vision (or hallucination). He returns to Jasper years later, to wait for whatever it was he saw to melt out of the glacier. His story is interspersed with fragments of the history of the Jasper region.

The style and structure of this novel attempt a mimesis of the glacial landscape, through sparse, fragmented, "cold" prose. The entries, as the various fragments are called, are intended to pile up in a "morainal" effect on the reader.

In a sense the landscape is the main character of this novel. Plot and character have been unified by place, by the effect of the landscape on human lives.

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I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of my supervisor, Kristjana Gunnars. Her insightful comments and enthusiasm for the project helped me work my way through the early rough drafts of the novel and bring it to its final form.

I also want to thank Sharon for light and warmth during the writing of this icy book.

As if everything in the world is the history of ice.

Michael Ondaatje
Coming Through Slaughter

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

There are three ways:

1. Read it as you would a novel, from the beginning. History, glaciology, and geography are interspersed to provide an entertaining as well as informative view of the icefield landscape. Terminology that may be unfamiliar to the first time visitor is explained along the way.

2. Take the book with you as a reference guide while exploring the icefield. Make your own entries in the blank section at the back of the book. A handy checklist of symbols and motifs has also been included to help you negotiate this sometimes confusing terrain.

3. Browse through the entries at random. Think of the book as a kind of terminal moraine, a deposition of fragments in which you may discover the tenuous presence of life.

Neve

This high plain of snow and ice cannot be seen from the valley, and must be imagined.

On the seventeenth of August, 1898, at half past three in the afternoon, Doctor Edward Byrne slipped on the ice of Arcturus Glacier and slid into a crevasse.

A few moments passed before his absence was noticed. Frank Trask, the expedition guide, made a quick head count and realized one man was missing. He alerted the others. They gathered together on the bare ice slope.

There was only one place Byrne could be. They crouched at the edge of the chasm and shouted the doctor's name but heard no reply. Trask knotted a stirrup at the end of a rope.

I'm not married, Professor Collie said. *I'll go.*

Trask shook his head. *I'm lighter than you.*

He was roped up and lowered into the abyss.

He found the doctor almost sixty feet below the ice surface, wedged upside down between the narrowing crevasse walls, soaked through with meltwater. Byrne was not moving. Trask had a second rope lowered down. To fasten it under Byrne's shoulders he had to cut the straps of the doctor's rucksack and jettison it into the crevasse.

Byrne was hauled out slowly onto the surface, his skin pale blue, his beard and clothing covered in a lacquer of refrozen meltwater.

Professor Collie examined him. *He's alive. Unconscious.*

Trask snorted. *Then he missed all the fancy words I used trying to get that damn rope around him.*

Hypothermy, said the professor. *We have to get him warmed up.*

They carried Byrne down the glacier to the terminus, where Peyto and the wranglers waited with the horses. The cook got a fire going. Byrne was stripped of his soaked, stiffened clothing, bundled in a huge buffalo robe. The professor rubbed his limbs and chest.

He's still with us. I've got a pulse.

After a few moments Byrne moved slightly. His breathing became audible. A pink glow spread from the center of his chest, outward to the limbs, suffusing the blue pallor. He coughed, opened his eyes and shut them again.

Hot tea was forced down his throat.

We must get him away from the ice, Collie said. *If we bivouac here he'll die.*

As he spoke he pried the pocketwatch from Byrne's closed fist.

Dark was rising in the valley. Collie intended to make camp in the shelter of the nearest stand of trees. Trask disagreed. He was sure he glimpsed lights further down the valley.

He rode on ahead and returned with the news that he had found a settlement at the site of the old trading post. Blankets and hot food awaited them.

I thought the place had been abandoned years ago.

He led them through the trees along the riverbank, into a grassy clearing. They saw lighted windows in the darkness and headed toward them.

Dear god, Stutfield said. *To think people live here through the winter for the sake of a few marten skins.*

A woman stood at the door of the trading post, holding up an oil lamp. She beckoned them inside.

I really don't remember any of this, though. I'm merely borrowing Mr Trask's version of events.

In the chalet glasshouse Byrne glances at Elspeth Fletcher, the hostess, as he tells his story. She is a pale light at the edge of his vision.

Trask folds his arms across his chest.

You're telling it fairly, doctor. Although I'd put more emphasis on the bravery of the young guide who saved your skin.

Water drips from the broad leaves of tropical plants. Droplets slide down the glass panes, veiled by condensation, that seem to be melting in the heat. The bubbling mineral fountain sends up clouds of steam.

Byrne wipes a handkerchief across his forehead. Glances through the glass wall at the blurred alpine landscape. The assembled guests are waiting for him to continue.

He would like to run outside into the cool Jasper evening.

His story is greeted with polite horror.

What was it like, asks Father Buckler, the Anglican minister. *In the crevasse?*

Cold, says Byrne. Everyone laughs. Byrne says nothing more. Frank Trask clears his throat, pounces on the unwanted silence.

That's how it was here back then, he says to corroborate Byrne's story. He was the guide on that expedition. Now he is part-owner of this chalet and its marvelous glasshouse. *Cold and desolate. I came west from Ontario at the age of sixteen, full of romantic notions. There was nothing here. Nothing. Whatever I had, I had to make for myself. It's no wonder the good doctor hasn't been back to Jasper for ten years.*

Trask sees the admiring glances directed at the doctor. A romantic figure to those who never venture past the

immaculate chalet lawn. He is one of their own, educated, cultured, and yet, he was down in that crevasse. It could be turned into a profitable idea. The man who was trapped in the jaws of icy death. The *icy* jaws of death. Better. Perhaps, Trask muses, he can persuade Byrne to lead tours to the glacier. If only he wasn't such a stiff-necked bastard.

At the time of his crevasse fall, Byrne was twenty-four years old, the youngest member of the Collie-Stutfield expedition.

John Norman Collie hoped to locate and climb the mountain that had appeared on atlases for decades as the highest peak in the dominion, Mount Brown. It had been seen and named decades earlier, during the fur trade, but its height and exact location were never scientifically verified.

Schoolchildren and mountaineers all over the empire believed in Mount Brown: the elusive Everest of the Rockies. The Geographical Society sent Collie and Hugh Stutfield to find it. The first man to reach the summit would be immortalized.

Byrne was enlisted in London as assistant to Professor Collie. He was the expedition's medic, tending blisters,

burns, fevers, whatever other ailments were to be expected in this rough terrain.

He also collected wildflowers.

Byrne's lost rucksack contained, besides his notebooks and some medical supplies, most of the seeds and bulbs he had gathered. Packed with native earth in small tin boxes. Byrne carried his collection with him everywhere, not trusting its safety to the caprices of the pack ponies. He brought the boxes with him onto the glacier, in the expectation of adding British Columbian flora once they crossed the continental divide.

He found that collecting specimens helped relieve the monotony and discomfort of camp life, the cramped sleeping space, tempers flaring over trivial matters, the longing for a washbasin, an armchair, meals not cooked and served in the same place: an intensifying purgatory he had not imagined when invited to join the expedition.

Now this newly created town of Jasper surrounds Byrne with most, if not all, the comforts of the modern world. He has a cozy room in the chalet. There are electric lights and palm trees in the lobby. He could sit at a comfortable desk in the lounge, under a delicate glass lamp, and write letters home. If he had anything to write.

Trask starts into a long tale of the difficulties involved in building the chalet. Byrne sips his tea and thinks about the glacier.

Not the fall. He cannot remember it. He knows only that they had unroped minutes before, at Collie's suggestion. The ice was bare of snow and thus unsafe for roped travel: one man's mishap would bring the others down with him. Once free of the rope, they started up through the labyrinth of crevasses at the base of the icefall.

They skirted the edge of a narrow chasm. Byrne stepped up close, craned his neck, removed his green-tinted snow goggles for a better look into the depths. He knew it was foolish even as he did it. The cold seemed to have numbed his good sense along with his fingers and toes. He leaned too far forward and lost his balance. Then he was in the dark, head downwards, meltwater spilling over him.

He heard shouts from above, but when he tried to answer them, his voice went flat and dead against the wall of sheer ice in front of his face.

He remembers the stillness, the blue gloom in the crevasse, how it suddenly gave way to light. The sun had broken through the clouds above the mountain, he realized, and somehow its radiance had penetrated into this dark

chasm. The ice wall before him slowly became illuminated with a pale green glow, as though from within.

Byrne was angry for a moment. Far above him, Professor Collie, Stutfield, Trask, were no doubt enjoying the brief sunshine while it lasted, unwinding the scarves from around their necks, taking off their gloves. A welcome respite from the stinging shards of ice blowing incessantly off the neve. From the swath of cloud that had eclipsed the peaks ever since the expedition set out from the CPR hotel in Banff. At last they were glimpsing the glories of the mountain heights. And he was trapped down here, freezing.

Then he realized he could see quite far into the interior of the ice wall. It was almost free of impurities, like blue glass. He could trace the light and dark bands of foliation, see thin capillaries of meltwater in the interstices between ice crystals. And there was something else. He squinted, pressed his face against the ice. A white shape.

A fused mass of trapped air bubbles, or a vein of snow, had formed a chance design, a somehow familiar image, embedded within the blue ice matrix and revealed by the light of the sun.

A human figure, with wings.

The illusion was magnificent. The white figure seemed to be lying on its side, the face turned away from him. The huge wings were spread wide, one of them cracked at an oblique angle, the broken pinions slightly detached.

One arm was also visible, outstretched.

The shape appeared to be formed out of an infiltration of silvery-grey and white ice. It gleamed wetly like fine porcelain or delicately veined marble.

Byrne groped instinctively for his notebook, found he could not reach around to the side pocket of his rucksack. He struggled momentarily and then went still, realizing his movements might precipitate him further into the crevasse.

He looked at the winged shape for some time. Motionless and silent, it seemed to intimate the possibility of a perfect, timeless peace.

Byrne's head was pounding and it was difficult to think: what would the orientation of this artifact be if he were in an upright position? It seemed to be very large. Did the surrounding ice cause a magnifying effect? He gave up the effort and closed his eyes. When he looked again, the light had faded. The ice wall was blank, impenetrable.

He laughed. It was absurd. A figure from a long-forgotten childhood dream.

He came awake. He was still in the ice.

How long had he been unconscious? No way to tell. The earlier pain had sunk and deepened into a jagged stone in the middle of his chest. His limbs were dead, without sensation. He argued with himself, talking against the desire to sleep.

He had been wedged here for hours. Centuries. Freezing into absolute stillness, his thoughts crystallized around one idea. He moved an arm, fumbled in his coat for his pocket watch. He had to know the time. Time did not freeze into immobility. Time would go on and so would he.

Did he have the watch? He could not be sure. His fingers were numb. Anyhow he would not be able to bring it up to his face. And perhaps it did not matter. He closed his eyes.

And woke to the scent of flowers.

Western anemone or chaliceflower. Glacier lily. Wild blue flax. Tansy. Four species of violet, seven of *Orchidaceae*. Dryas. Indian paintbrush. Bluebell. Wild rose. Spring beauty and grass-of-Parnassus.

He woke in a log cabin on a bed of furs. His arm was stiff, held tightly against his chest by something, a cloth or bandage. He was aware of his nakedness under the thick fur blankets that covered him.

He lifted his head and looked around at shelves cluttered with tins, bottles, papers. Skins and sleek pelts covered the walls. He counted three small windows, two of them covered with oil-stained parchment.

The meadow beyond the open doorway was filled with alpine flowers.

The woman sat in a chair by the door, watching him.

The flowers, Byrne said. *In my rucksack.*

Lost, the woman said. *The guide had no choice. He couldn't free you without cutting away your kit. Don't try to sit up. Your collarbone.*

Byrne lay back on the furs.

Where am I, he said weakly.

This is Jasper.

The woman, Sara, fed Byrne mulligatawny soup. The hot spicy liquid was difficult to swallow, but after a few mouthfuls Byrne felt warmer. He looked more closely at the woman.

She was dark-skinned, thin, with sharp cheekbones. Her long graying hair was tied back at the nape of the neck with an ancient bit of leather. In the light from the meadow her skin shone with a youthful glow. Age was in her eyes, in the weathered grace with which she moved about the cabin.

She turned away from him to set the soup bowl on the table, and he saw his grandmother. Nana. He was lying on a bed in her cottage kitchen, feverish. Near him a turf fire, soft rain outside in the garden. Nana singing to him. Soothing him.

This woman named Sara could have been thirty, or much older. After listening carefully to her speech, he identified the faint remnants of an Anglo-Indian accent.

She made very little sound, moved lightly, as if the wind blustering outside the cabin walls could blow through her.

Byrne felt he should talk to her, but he had no idea what to say.

Fragments of the last few days came back to Byrne as he lay in the cabin. Pain slicing through delirium as Collie tended to his broken collarbone. An argument over the feasibility of carrying him back down the trail to Banff. No way to get a stretcher over the pass. The rivers would be swollen now with late summer meltwater and dangerous even for able-bodied travelers. He imagined at times that he was still in the crevasse, listening to their deliberations from a great depth. Furious at them, at himself, he shouted at Collie, but fell back into a stupor.

They had left him in the care of the woman, to make another attempt on the glacier. Collie wanted his mountain. Once he had found it or admitted defeat, they would return and take him back to civilization.

Lying alone in the quiet cabin, he decided this was right. If he could only just lie there and rest, nothing else mattered.

He slept.

Drifting back to England in his dreams.

His visits to the botanical gardens at Kew, out of the city haze and into a captive wilderness. Flowers grown from the specimens collected by David Douglas and other early scientist-explorers of the Rockies were displayed there. In the humid and genteel garden he breathed their delicate scents, trying to summon up from those ephemeral sensations the majestic vistas of the Rocky mountains.

He was there now, wasn't he? When he opened his eyes he would see the well-tended rows of plants, the old whiskered nurseryman in his smock, carrying a flower bowl like a chalice up the lofty aisle.

He opened his eyes. He was in the cabin.

He had hoped to create his own private botanical collection, grown from his field specimens, when he returned

to London. Perhaps, he had hoped, he would even see some of his own flowers blossoming at Kew.

As he lay in the cabin, he considered the idea of climbing back down into the crevasse to salvage what he could. Of course Collie would never allow it. And by now the crevasse had probably changed shape, perhaps even closed over forever as snow fell and the glacier crawled slowly forward.

Then he remembered what he had seen, or imagined, in the ice wall. He would not return to the crevasse, even if it were possible. For the first time in his life, he had no desire to freeze doubt into cold certainty.

We'll return as soon as we can, Collie said before they left him. *You'll be fine for now.*

When they returned he would ride to Edmonton in a cart, driven by a settler named Swift, who lived nearby and agreed to accompany them.

During the daytime children gathered at the open doorway of the trading post to peer in at Byrne. Women came and herded them away. He also saw, or thought he saw in his delirium, the dark shapes of men in the clearing, men with horses, dogs, bundles on their backs.

Only Sara came near him, and she said almost nothing.

A noise, rapping on glass. Someone knocking. Brought him up out of sleep to answer the call. Always urgent at this hour.

In the window. A giant's hand.

He made a sound of sleepy terror. *Hahhh*.

The hand bobbed slightly, then sank, revealing grey dawn light. Elk antler.

He took a deep breath, childhood nightmares subsiding. He sat motionless and listened while the huge animal bumped along the wall of the cabin, foraging the long grass.

Sara came in a few moments later.

I heard you cry out, she said.

Byrne shook his head. *Nothing. The elk, it woke me up rather suddenly.*

Do you need anything?

He looked closely at her.

Tell me about this place. He would give nothing away. Only listen.

This small cabin was once a Hudson's Bay Company trading post. Sara's father took it over after the last trader left for the Cariboo gold rush.

Before that Anand Viraj, her father, was in the service of an English lord, as his valet. That was thirty years ago or more.

He was not a healthy man, Lord Sexsmith, Sara told Byrne as daylight washed into the meadow. *The doctors told him an excursion in the fresh air would be beneficial, so he looked in an atlas and chose the Rockies. Of course my father had no choice but to accompany him.*

Byrne sat propped up in the narrow bed. She had talked for an hour, while she made his tea and breakfast, and sat with him while he ate it.

He was alone here, with this youthful ancient woman. A woman with stories.

On the plain outside Fort Edmonton, Sexsmith stretched his arms to the sky. He turned to his valet, Anand Viraj.

The prisoner of civilization is free.

The company men who were to travel with them stood nearby, holding the horses loaded like camels with mountains of baggage.

Sexsmith had not been told about the mosquitos. The stars were blotted out by them. The men had to light smudge fires in a ring around the camp every night to keep the horses from stampeding. Baptiste the Iroquois showed Viraj that one could use alder leaves to sooth the bites.

Sexsmith had his tent cocooned in netting. He retired there, covered in salve, with Shakespeare.

A three day rainstorm gave a respite. The horses rolled in a wet buffalo wallow and were ridden as they were, encased in carapaces of dried mud. Some developed terrible saddle sores which the men rubbed with salt to form calluses. Three of the pack ponies were past any remedy and had to be shot.

One morning a group of Cree hunters rode up. They brought bear's tongues as a gift to the great lord visiting their lands. Macpherson bartered with them for horses. Sexsmith reluctantly had to surrender half the tobacco he had brought.

The river was high, turbulent.

At sunset they halted on a slender island, little more than a willowed gravel bar, in the middle of the river. Sexsmith desired to camp here.

This is quite picturesque. I'll call it little Albion. It's even shaped something like England, wouldn't you say, Anand?

He strolled along the bank, prodding his stick in the stony earth.

You see, here is Southampton. That rock out there is the Isle of Wight. It all works out.

Macpherson, the chief guide, agreed to the campsite reluctantly, but he led the horses across to forage on the far bank, and stayed there with them. On the island, the

other men built a fire with bleached driftwood. They cooked a pemmican stew and sang songs.

My boy's far away in the land that's called Canada
There would he go, though it left me lone and sad
O, 'twas gold he would gain to send home to his mother
Will he e'er come back to me, my little Irish lad?

Sexsmith crossed a blue terrain of hummocks and hollows, over Hadrian's Wall, to the upstream end of the island. The sky in the west was bright green, the mountain there a black fortress.

All his senses were dulled by the long ride across the plain, all except hearing. In the failing light he listened to the river rolling rocks in its bed. The rustle and click of willow shrubs in the evening wind.

The geese called, laughing in the dark
ha hon ha hon ha hon ha hon

Two visions drew the English lord on into the mountains.

The first was a grizzly bear, charging across the meadow toward them. He would be kneeling with Macpherson, rifles leveled, rock steady. The flash and report, the bear toppling, a wall of grey fur and muscle avalanching into the

dust. Baptiste the Iroquois would cut out the heart, present it to him. The hot sensual heart sliding across his hand.

The second vision was of the Grail.

You are Irish, I think, Sara said to Byrne. She sat on a bench in the doorway of the cabin, smoking her evening pipe.

I was born in Dublin, Byrne nodded, frowning. He sniffed, glanced away toward the window. *But I've lived in England since I was a boy.*

Sara smiled.

I thought I could hear it in your voice. Today you asked for another cup of tay. *My father used to mimic the accent.* Jaysus Mary and Joseph. *It would send the traders into laughing fits.*

Byrne pushed away the memory of a dark church niche, dim candlelight. A sad, gentle face of cold stone. *Ever this day be at my side.*

They made fun of my father, the Company men, said Sara. *They called him the tarred butler. He knew nothing about their world. And they knew nothing of his.*

On some of the trees they passed the bark had been blazed away in one place. On the white inner flesh were scrawled messages, drawings, in charcoal.

The blazes were high up, ten feet or more, on the branchless trunks.

I pray we don't meet any of the giants who made those marks, Sexsmith said, masking his unease with a wry smile. *I think my valet would die of fright.*

Joseph explained to him that the signs were messages from hunters and trappers to one another. They were made in the winter, with four feet of snow on the ground.

They struggled up the gorge of a river just this day named by Sexsmith. Hemmed in by dark walls of rock, deafened by the roar of rapids. Sexsmith rode the black horse he had dubbed *The Night*.

One of the packhorses slipped and rolled down the slope. Another panicked and followed it. Then a third. They were brought up short, one after another, by a thick clump of dwarf spruce, on the edge of a precipice. Rocks clattered distantly onto a gravel bar far below.

The packers cursed, jostled one another, screamed insults at the helpless animals.

Demon. Sinner. I'll flay your hide.

Macpherson finally crawled down the slope after the horses. Sexsmith dismounted to wait, and smoked his pipe.

When the horses were retrieved, their packs righted, they carried on, out of the canyon and into a sloping meadow.

The white summit of a pyramid-shaped mountain climbed before them, one they had seen from a distance the day before and remarked for its beauty. *A palace,* Sexsmith wrote in his journal, *rose-pearl in the late sunlight, an oriental mosque floating in air.*

In proximity, the mountain gained massive presence. And with it came another optical illusion. This was not a great height above them but a terrible drop, the edge of earth and far below it an empty blue ocean.

Sexsmith called a halt. He took a deep shuddering breath. His body went slack and he dropped the reins.

Anand, your arm, my good fellow.

Sexsmith crawled down off the saddle and stepped forward. He took the spyglass from around his neck, fell to one knee.

He was thirty-one years old. A Victorian in the presence of the sublime.

The lord made sketches in his notebook, estimated the height of peaks, bestowed names where there were none as yet on the maps or in the knowledge of his guides.

Arcturus. Meru. Parnassus. Mount Abora. Tintagel.

He saw a range of sawtooth mountains stretching into the blue haze of distance. Of eternity.

The Upanishad Range, he said, inscribing their outline into his notebook, indicating each distinct peak with a

cross. Viraj helped him with the names. *Isa*. *Kena*. *Katha*. *Prasna*. *Mundaka*.

Sara took Byrne with her on this journey that she never witnessed. That she might have been weaving out of the thin mountain air, out of the gloom of a snow-locked cabin during the long winters. What he learned of her life was gathered slowly in the wake of her father's story.

She lived alone in her cabin, in the midst of this metis settlement. The Stoney people she had known as a child did not come into the Jasper valley very often anymore. In the treaties they had chosen land further south. The last factor of the Company trading post left several years ago, to try his luck in the Klondike. Viraj, her father, was dead.

Byrne listened. He waited in the trading post for the return of the expedition. Soon he gained enough strength to sit up on the edge of the bed. He kept himself covered with the fur blanket. Sara gave him the clothes and personal effects that Collie had left for him. She went outside to wait, at his request, while he struggled into his shirt, trousers, and boots. She came back in with a marmot skin

robe, placed it over his shoulders, helped him out onto the stoop of the cabin.

This place that Sara called Jasper was a collection of rough log cabins and plank shacks, scattered over a meadowy river flat. Several metis families lived here, as well as Swift, his wife and children. A few horses could be seen moving, under the trees, lowering their dark heads to the wet grass.

Above the cabins and their thin morning tendrils of smoke rose the icy mountains. They hung suspended, scintillant, in the sharp air. Byrne shaded his eyes against their brightness. For a moment he could almost suspend belief in their hard, solid, unfathomable mass. A quick breath might shatter them like an illusion of ice crystals and light.

At this distance, the crevasses and icefalls of Arcturus glacier were delicate, like tiny wrinkles in pale blue silk, ethereal. And above them Byrne could see, at the lip of the glacier where it first tumbled over the mountain wall, the pure white snow of the neve.

There are no doctors here, Sara said. *The railway will be coming this way in a few years, they say. The railroad men will need a doctor to travel up and down the line. You could be stationed here.*

Byrne shook his head angrily.

My life is in England.

After two days Swift had not yet come to see Byrne. He was a busy man. Building a sluice system and watermill to grind his own flour.

Swift, Sara told him, was an American. He arrived in the valley twenty five years after Sexsmith's journey. It was said he had been a scout for General Custer's cavalry but left that employment several weeks before the battle of Little Bighorn.

Sara brought a book to his cabin one evening.

Byrne saw that the covers of the book and the edges of its pages were flaking away. Sara sat down by the bedside.

Sexsmith liked to have my father read poetry to him. And my father read it to me.

She turned the pages slowly, reverently, and then began to read aloud. In a voice like spring leaves against a windowpane.

In Xanadu did Kubla Khan

A stately pleasure-dome decree:

Where Alph, the sacred river, ran

Through caverns measureless to man

Down to a sunless sea.

Viraj prepared a bath for the lord.

The india-rubber bathtub was one of the few luxuries Sexsmith decided he could not dispense with. He allowed no one else the use of it. It was here, immersed in water heated by Viraj and perfumed with bath oil, that he read Shakespeare and made his critical notes in the margins.

Perfect. Exactly the temperature and humidity of your monsoon season, Sexsmith chuckled as he eased himself into the tub.

One evening when the bath had just been made ready, Viraj informed his lordship that a group of Stoney hunters was encamped nearby. Among them were two brothers who claimed they had traveled much in the area. They might know more about the way ahead.

Send for them, Sexsmith commanded.

He was still soaking when the Stoney brothers, Joseph and Elias, entered the tent unannounced, Viraj gesturing them away in alarm. They gaped at Sexsmith. Then their faces softened with shy smiles. Sexsmith glanced up over his Shakespeare. He broke into a laugh, invited them to have a seat and talk.

The brothers returned the next day, bringing a young woman with them. Her face was painted blue, with white jagged streaks below the eyes. A thin robe of ermine fur covered her shoulders like snow. The men watched silently as she walked through the camp, as they would at the passage of some unknown animal.

It's the windigo, they said jokingly to Viraj when she had gone by. *She'll devour you in the night.*

Joseph said she was their adopted sister. She knew the land better than they did. Her people had lived here in this valley, and even deeper in the mountains. With her along they would never get lost.

They called her Athabasca.

She is the last of the Snake people, Joseph said. *She spoke with the white-winged one, sister of the raven, and became a healer.*

On this trip, he explained, she could gather rare herbs needed for her medicines.

Sexsmith was skeptical, but allowed her to accompany them.

She will keep her magic potions to herself.

The new guides began their employment with proper ceremony.

In the spruce bark tipi Sexsmith lifted a paper cone in his finger tips, held it up before Joseph and Elias.

He bit on the end of the small white cone, pulled it quickly away from his mouth as the paper fussed into blue flame. The brothers blinked and Joseph jerked his head away as the fire was thrust toward him.

The tipi filled with laughter. Sexsmith smiled and set the tiny flame to the end of his pipe.

The humble Prometheus match, he said. The young woman sat staring at the straw-covered floor of the tipi. Sexsmith frowned.

I would like very much to know how she can find her way so well when she never looks up.

The older brother, Joseph, said something to her in her own language. She raised her head. The flat stone hanging from a leather strap around her neck caught the firelight and gleamed.

The young woman held out her left hand, palm toward Sexsmith.

She has the tracks of the rivers, Joseph said. *On her hand. The rivers and all the streams.*

Sexsmith leaned closer and examined the young woman's hand.

What's this reddish blotch here? he said, stabbing a finger into her palm.

She burned herself there once, said Joseph. He pointed to her pendant. *Taking that stone out of the fire.*

An incomplete map, then, Sexsmith said. *But I imagine there are a few goldseekers,* he made a chopping motion with his hand, *who would like to have it.*

At night the temperature in Jasper plummeted. A solemn young man Byrne had never seen before brought in a stack of stovewood. He was dark of skin, had bright reddish-blond hair. *Scots metis,* Byrne thought. The young man went out again immediately, saying nothing. With his good arm Byrne dragged the one chair in the cabin over to the stove. He huddled there, humming to himself, bored, uncomfortable.

Byrne heard music. Drums, pipes, a fiddle. Laughter. He got up from the chair, rubbed the frosted window and peered out. A square of golden light hung in the blackness: the window of Sara's cabin. Dancing shadows flickered across the light.

The window he was looking through slowly frosted over again. The distant square of light dilated into a glittering pattern of gold points.

He was enveloped in a fragile bubble of warmth that extended just to the reach of his arm. He found the boundaries of this shell by breathing out, watching the exhaled air appear, a spectral cloud of steam that congealed

and slid to the floor. When he rocked back too far, he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rising as they touched the outer layer of his sphere.

In this embryonic state he passed the rest of the night, reaching for sticks of wood and tossing them on the fire like an automaton.

Sara read to Byrne from the works of Coleridge, Shelley, Wordsworth, Keats. From Malory and Shakespeare. She explained that the books belonged to Sexsmith. He left them with Viraj when he released him from service. *A light in the wilderness*.

In the mountains, Sexsmith's head pounded every evening. His digestion rebelled against the coarse fare of the trail. He could not sleep. Viraj kept vigil outside his tent in case he called for anything.

At midnight Sexsmith stepped outside into the darkness. The fire had died out and the world was illuminated by the stars.

Macpherson was standing at the river's edge, smoking his pipe. When he saw Sexsmith approach he smiled easily, as though all distinctions of class and birth had been washed away by the starlight.

In the west a silver glow emanated from beyond the black bulk of a mountain wall. Sexsmith questioned Macpherson about it.

I've never seen such a thing, said Macpherson. *The moon, I'd say it is, not yet risen. But there is no moon tonight.*

That's the place I've been seeking, Sexsmith whispered.

The Grail.

Sexsmith dreamed of a knight, his armor rusty, his long white hair flowing out behind him in the western wind. He walked stiffly, held up more by his armor than his own failing strength, carrying a silver chalice across the plain, toward the shining mountains. He was the last survivor of an entire company of armored men.

They had crossed the western sea with their sacred trust, searching for a place where the Grail could be kept safe through the ages, until the king rose again.

Sexsmith woke at dawn. His dream lingered with him, shining at the edges of his mind.

Viraj was at the campfire, making coffee and heating water for shaving. Sexsmith was surprised to see the young woman sitting beside him. The paint was gone from her face.

Now she looked cold, hungry, mortal. A thin girl warming herself by the fire.

The brothers stood talking with Macpherson while he mended a halter.

Elias, the younger brother, laughed. He had a quiet, pleasing laugh. Sexsmith glanced up. He liked Elias, his soft voice and unassuming demeanor.

Whatever Elias had said, it had even put a smile on Joseph's gaunt, scarred face, Sexsmith turned away in annoyance. Joseph had a smile that made him look diabolical.

They had breakfast and got under way, leading the horses across a shallow, braided stream. Macpherson took the reins of Sexsmith's shying horse and led it himself. When they reached dry ground, Sexsmith said,

The Stoneys were amused at something this morning.

Macpherson nodded.

Elias had a dream, sir. He thought it worth the telling.

Sexsmith called the brothers to him. He asked to hear the dream. Elias smiled in embarrassment.

I went with you to your city of London. There were plenty of buffalo there. I hunted them, with the Queen's sons. We chased buffalo over a jump. But when we went down to the bottom of the cliff, the animals had turned into books.

He grinned shyly at his brother and went on, in a near whisper.

The Queen's sons tried to read the books, but all the words were smashed in.

Sexsmith glanced at Joseph, whose gaunt face had withdrawn into grey immobility.

So tell me, Joseph. You are a wise fellow. Will you interpret your brother's dream?

The hunting party ascended a ridge running parallel to a stream of ice.

Arcturus glacier, Sexsmith named it.

Dark clouds piled up over the peaks in the west. Macpherson expected snow every day. He told Sexsmith that there would be no game at such an altitude.

Sexsmith was convinced this last ridge would yield to the finest hunting grounds yet.

The burn on the girl's palm, he said. *We're just below it now. I want to know what's there, what she's hiding from us.*

The young woman shook her head and spoke a few words. Joseph turned to Sexsmith.

She's been there, he said. *She says it's a spirit place. Not for the living.*

I'll find out for myself, Sexsmith said. His suspicions were confirmed. She was terrified, her great secret about to be violated.

They said they got her from the Snakes, Sexsmith said to Viraj. *And we all know the serpent is the subtlest beast of the field.*

He sent everyone back down to the camp, told Macpherson to keep a close watch on the young woman. *She'll be ransom against my safe return.* He went on alone with the Stoney brothers.

It was late. Byrne and Sara sat facing each other in front of the stove. The one candle on the shelf above the bed was drowning in its own wax. In the sepia gloom, Sara's skin resembled parchment. She tapped her pipe against the firebox and set it down.

My father and the others stayed below in camp. While they waited an ice spire broke off the glacier and tumbled down near them. The company men took pieces of this broken ice to soothe the blisters on their hands and feet.

Athabasca came up and put a piece of ice in my father's hands. It was exactly the size of a cricket ball, he told me, and looked like a blue-green diamond. He held it for a moment...

Sara cupped her hands around an invisible chunk of ice,

... then dropped it because his hands were burning.

Her hands moved apart.

He'd never been that close to ice, never touched it before.

Sexsmith and the brothers returned to camp the next evening. Macpherson was called into the lord's tent. He came out with an announcement that the hunting trip was at an end. They would start back down in the morning. The Company men cheered and sang.

Viraj brought Sexsmith his supper. The lord was sitting on the edge of his camp bed, gripping a bottle of medicinal brandy.

Listen to them, he growled. *Alexander's army.*

What was it, Byrne asked. *That turned Sexsmith back. If it's some hazard the professor should've been warned of....*

Sara shrugged.

Sexsmith was warned, she said. *But he went up anyway.*

Byrne frowned, sat back in his chair.

When I was in the crevasse.... He paused, rubbed his shoulder. *What did the girl mean by a spirit place?*

I don't know, Sara said. *I never knew my mother.*

On the return journey, Sexsmith, suffering from fatigue and dyspepsia, retired to his tent. He refused to travel for several days. The hunting party camped on the river flats near the trading post.

The Stoney brothers told Viraj that their sister could be of help to the ailing lord.

Viraj went with this message to Sexsmith. He was reading *The Tempest* and did not care to be reminded of the world outside his canvas walls.

I wish I could be transported back to England without leaving this tent. That would be pleasant indeed.

Viraj urged Sexsmith to let the healer see him. Sexsmith hit him on the side of the face with the book.

You forget your place, Sexsmith said.

You are quite right, Viraj said. He went out, rode in a canoe with the Stoney brothers and the young woman, back to their fall camp on the far side of the river. When Sexsmith called for him he refused to come. Finally the lord crossed over himself. In the camp, surrounded by racks of drying meat, master and valet came to a gentlemanly agreement: Viraj was no longer in Sexsmith's service.

The next summer Athabasca took Viraj as her husband. They had a child, and Viraj gave her the name Sarasvati.

Joseph and Elias took Viraj hunting with them. They found a smouldering campfire in a narrow ravine. Joseph picked up a broken branch from some kind of tree that Viraj had never seen before.

Cedar, said Joseph. *The Snake people.*

Later they came out of the forest toward that Stoney camp like ghosts, four men, three women, a child. They had come into the valley from the west to trade furs, and though Athabasca did not remember them, she knew their language. One evening Athabasca gave Viraj the stone from around her neck. When the Snake people left that night, without a word, she went with them.

Sarasvati grew up with her father. The people of the valley, the hunters and trappers and their children, changed her name to Sara.

Shouts, from the children outside, in the meadow.

Collie and Stutfield returned at last, alone. Trask and the wranglers had started south for their headquarters in Banff. The two men strode into the cabin, sunburnt and wearily triumphant.

Collie had not found his mountain. He had stumbled upon a new world.

The icefield, he said, eyes glittering in his wind-blasted face. *I thought it would be an ordinary neve, feeding a single glacier. But it's huge, Ned. Stretches for miles. Greater than any mer de glace in the Alps. Breathtaking.*

Stutfield nodded decisively.

We are probably the first human beings ever to lay eyes on it.

Byrne glanced at Sara. Her face was impassive. She knew he would say nothing, he read that much in her eyes. He was still afraid she had been weaving tall tales.

Imagine, Collie whispered. *The frozen wellspring of an entire continent.*

Preparations were made for departure. There was a long trek ahead of them, especially with an injured man, and in deteriorating weather. Byrne spent one last night in the trading post. The next morning, Collie and Stutfield went to find Swift.

I always wondered what Sexsmith had found up there, Sara said to Byrne as they waited on the cabin steps. *He told my father nothing when he came back down off the glacier.*

You never went up there with Viraj, with your father, Byrne asked. *Living so close by all these years?*

Sara frowned and looked across the valley at the ice.

In my father's country the mountains are gods. And for my mother's people as well, he told me. I knew I belonged down here in the valley.

Snow flurried through the morning air as Swift's cart, pulled by two lean horses, creaked up in front of the trading post.

Swift jumped down from the cart with the agility of a cat. He wore a grey suit and necktie. A wide-brimmed stetson shadowed his gaunt face. His hawk eyes studied Byrne for a brief moment.

Let's go, he said.

Byrne turned to Sara. He considered the few coins in his buttoned pocket, then decided against it.

Thank you, he said.

He was installed in a corner of the cart, made comfortable with cushions and a sleigh robe.

Swift flicked the reins and they jolted into motion across the meadow, Collie and Stutfield riding ahead on horses purchased from Trask. Byrne glanced up at the cabin. Sara was gone from the doorway.

He sank back into the cushions and closed his eyes. The cart bumped and swayed along the track, lulling him. Bringing a rhythm, and a singsong voice, out of the past.

Doctor Foster went to Gloucester
in a shower of rain
he stepped in a puddle right up to his middle
and never went there again.

Sexsmith had to be satisfied with a black bear. The men skinned it and cut it open. There were live ants in its belly.

Sexsmith examined the carcass, stripped to pink muscle. The hairless face grimaced in frozen hilarity.

Moraine

Rock debris deposited by the receding ice: a seemingly chaotic jumble of fragments. But from these fragments history can be reconstructed.

A voice.

Byrne comes back to himself, takes a sip of tea. It has gone cold, and Trask has finished his story about the chalet. Byrne realizes he was jolted from his reverie by the

voice of Freya Croston. She asks Trask if he would consider building a teahouse at the summit of Mount Arcturus.

I'm climbing it this summer. Up there a hot drink would fetch any price you'd dare charge.

Byrne glances up at her, studies her coldly. The notorious Miss Croston. Pilloried by the Canadian papers for daring to encroach upon the male world of mountaineering. She is loud, impulsive, seems barely able to stay in her chair.

Next to her sits Hal Rowan, the young poet turned wilderness guide.

Byrne is conscious that he and Rowan are there to impress the local dignitaries. They are the British: they are expected to behave with decorum, with cool reserve lightened by gleams of urbane wit.

He is also aware of Elspeth's presence, the way her eyes meet his whenever he glances in her direction.

She is the hostess at the chalet.

She came from Inverness, having managed a tea and pastry shop there. A Canadian aunt of hers had met Trask while on a railway excursion through the Rockies. In the dining car Trask talked effusively about his new "glacier" chalet, the difficulty of finding trustworthy staff. The

aunt mentioned her niece. A bright young woman. Diligent. Level headed.

Trask wrote Elspeth a letter in which he asked her such questions as *Do you smoke?* and *How tall are you?* and even *What color is your hair?*

Elspeth was twenty-six years old. She was unmarried. This was an adventure.

She answered everything truthfully except the question about smoking. And instead of telling him her hair was red, which might mark her as hot-tempered, she wrote *auburn*.

She stepped off the train that first day to be met by one of Trask's men. He said hardly a word to her, seemed unwilling to look at her. She understood later he was bearing the weight of his good fortune, being the one chosen to meet *the young woman*.

The older woman she had shared a compartment with, who was going on to Vancouver, came out to take her picture.

Let's get you and the young gentleman here, and the train together.

Elspeth and the guide were obliged to step off the platform. Elspeth stood in a patch of spring snow. Her felt train slippers were instantly soaked. She smiled for the photograph, her feet throbbing with cold.

In the glasshouse grow delphiniums, tulips, peonies. Apple trees blossom there, and lilac bushes. Elspeth has even coaxed an elm into cautious growth.

There is an arbor in the glasshouse, with a vine-covered trellis around it. A rock pool with a fountain bubbles in the centre of the arbor. The water is heated by the hot spring.

Elspeth and her guests retire to the enclosed garden for iced drinks and sandwiches in the afternoons. Humid air fills the glasshouse like a rippling green liquid. The guests stir uncomfortably in their wicker chairs. The men pull at their collars.

This is the first time Byrne has seen the chalet glasshouse. He has been engaged all summer as the railroad doctor, his living quarters a screened enclosure in the field hospital.

He is delighted and appalled at the same time, knowing the cost and effort of such a display, especially in this unyielding landscape. He remembers the tiny native specimens he had collected painstakingly on the expedition. Here there are flowers from Europe, India, the Pacific islands. *Camellia sinensis* growing next to edelweiss.

The guests sip iced tea, help themselves to tiny cucumber and orange slice sandwiches. Trask tells mountain stories and the party lingers into the evening.

Elspeth knows the right moment. She rises and asks her guests to follow her down the stone path to the back gate. They stroll through a tunnel of thick foliage.

Elspeth unlocks the narrow wooden door and swings it open. Gelid air rushes into the glasshouse. Like rubbing alcohol it lifts away the film of sweat from Byrne's skin.

The glasshouse fills with fog. The guests watch one another grow pale and recede. To their delight, feathery snowflakes appear above them, drifting down on their heads, on the leaves of the tropical flowers.

While they stand at the back gate and talk, the mountains move closer in the twilight. Patches of snow gleam like phosphors against the dark rock. Hal Rowan steps out into the gloom. He turns and regards the others through the haze of his cigarette smoke. His expression is unreadable.

Trask frowns at him, clears his throat.

I understand you're also back to study glaciers, Doctor Byrne.

That's right, Byrne says tersely.

You're a persistent sort, I'll grant you that. But I'm afraid I won't be there this time to get you out of trouble.

Rowan's sudden voice comes out of the dark.

The glaciers creep like snakes that watch their prey.

The guests glance at each other. Another awkward silence falls. Elspeth opens her mouth, then snaps it shut.

Shelley, I believe, Byrne says, coming to someone's rescue, Rowan's or Miss Fletcher's. Or both.

Rowan flicks his cigarette away. There is evidently nothing more to be said. Elspeth turns toward the mountains.

What can you tell us, doctor, about glaciers? I'm afraid it's a subject most of us like to keep at a distance.

Byrne raises his cup of cold tea.

Think of this cup filling to the brim and then overflowing. The glacier is an overflow from a great basin filled with ice.

Ten thousand years ago the ice filled this entire valley.

Elspeth watches Byrne as he speaks. He is ten years her senior, and looks much older, weatherworn. His manner is distant, reserved. She feels a desire to touch his face, imagining it would be as cool as marble.

He has returned to the mountains after more than a decade. To the place where he nearly lost his life. She wants to know why.

As the Collie expedition headed east, Byrne told himself he would never return.

When the great sooty arches of the King's Cross terminus rose before him out of the London haze, he was certain of that. He was home.

The first thing he did upon entering his flat was to light a fire in the grate. He stood there in his overcoat waiting for warmth to fill the room.

Within three months he was assistant physician at Saint Mary's Hospital. The social circle he moved in claimed his leisure time. A stiff shoulder was his only memento of Jasper.

Five years after his return to England he took another trip. This time to France.

He jostled through a crowd on the Champs Elysees.

The Paris of his imagination was a city entirely unlike London, without this endless procession of faces and bodies. The day was hot and damp. He had overdressed. The crowd swarmed like fish in an aquarium.

He sat down on a bench, dizzy, his awareness of time and space abruptly fogged. He had to think for a moment before he recalled the time of day, the place, what sights he intended to visit.

He closed his eyes and found himself in the unearthly stillness of the crevasse. The silent, graceful figure entombed there before him in the ice. And all around him, around the two of them, the meditation of ice and rock.

Once again in London, amid the familiar clutter of his study, Byrne collated his information about Jasper. He read the reports and memoirs of A. P. Coleman, Sir George Simpson, the painter Streit. He made notes from memory of the stories told him by Sara, by the settler Swift on the journey to Edmonton. He found Sexsmith's memoir of his travels in the Rockies, a rare book. It told of hunting adventures, barely mentioned the Stoney brothers and the young woman. And of the icefield, not one word. Sexsmith wrote of his decision to turn back, blaming it on fatigue and the grumbling of the men.

Byrne read everything he could find on glaciers, on the ice ages. The romantic Agassiz, John Tyndall the cool-headed Victorian, the methodical observations of the Vaux family.

He underlined Tyndall's quiet confessions:

I was soon upon the ice, once more alone, as I delight to be at times.

For Tyndall, a greater mystery than glacial dynamics was the human imagination. From *a few scattered observations* it had reconstructed the prehistory of the world. Was

imagination, he wondered, an energy *locked like latent heat in ancient inorganic nature?*

Or rather, Byrne wrote in his journal, *was it a power that overflowed from some unseen source, that covered and reshaped the world?*

And with that thought, a fact he had always known and yet ignored rose into the light of significance. Glaciers are rivers. Water.

The basic paradox: frozen flow. Fragments embedded in the ice never move, are ceaselessly in motion.

As the ice flowed downward from its site of accumulation, it descended into a warmer climatic zone and melted away. If the amount of summer melt exceeded the rate of advance, the glacier receded. To early European observers it seemed that the ice was actually crawling backwards up the mountain. Land previously buried reappeared. In the Alps bodies of missing ice climbers had emerged from the receding snouts of glaciers years, even decades, after they were lost.

He scribbled wild ideas in his journal.

Could a spiritual entity become frozen in ice? Could such an entity be enmeshed in physical forces, immobilized, and thus rendered physical and solid itself?

And when it melted out of the ice, would it then just sublimate back into metaphysical space, leaving human time and scientific observation behind?

At the Society headquarters on Savile Row he met with Professor Collie, who had revisited the Rockies several times since the 1898 expedition.

They sat together in the Society tearoom, two bachelors. Collie was a man of science, a chemist. With his colleague Ramsay he had recently isolated a new element: neon.

We found that the excitation of the gas molecules produces a rather pleasing illumination, Collie explained. *It might have some uses for commercial lighting.*

Byrne found himself avoiding the very subject he had hoped to discuss: what he had seen in the crevasse. And he saw that Collie had guessed there was an unspoken purpose behind his questions. The two of them lapsed into silence.

At the far end of the tearoom sat an explorer recently returned from Asia, surrounded by an eager audience. His stentorian voice reached to the table where Collie and Byrne sat. They were forced to listen.

A godawful place, the Gobi, the explorer said. *And yet lovely.*

He appeared lost in reverie for a moment.

I quite liked it. It resembled my mind.

Byrne pieced together a private, fragmentary history of Jasper, riddled with lacunae. A sketchy geological record of dreams, tall tales, struggles, mistakes:

1. The winter of 1811: David Thompson, in his search for a fur trade route to the Pacific, entered the Athabasca valley.

The scene of desolation before us was dreadful.

His men refused to linger there, under the eaves of the glaciers.

Strange to say, Thompson wrote in his journal, *here is a strong belief that the haunt of the Mammoth is about this defile.*

2. The artist did not like the way the wood burned in this country. It snapped harshly, with a disturbing echo. He did not like the way the rivers flowed. And the trees were thin, scabbed, spaced too far apart.

In 1857, the landscape painter Wilhelm Streit passed through the Jasper area on a tour arranged by George Simpson, governor of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Simpson commissioned several paintings for the company headquarters at Lachine, Quebec. To reveal to guests the glories of the fur empire he commanded.

The artist traveled in a canoe with the company traders and clerks. He camped with them, ate with them, slept in tents with them. And while they hunted, he wandered and sketched.

The party went over Athabasca Pass and down the Columbia River to the Pacific coast. A message from the artist was sent back overland to Simpson. It despaired of

... the problems of light... I stare helplessly at the blank canvas.... qualities I could never render in paint....

The governor's reply, reaching Streit at his winter accommodations in Victoria, was terse.

You will render them in paint.

The painter, in desperation, fell back on European principles of the picturesque. He tore up his field sketches, used them as fuel to heat his damp, drafty room, and painted, from nostalgic memory, the Austrian Alps.

The true artist gives expression to the common truths of all humanity, preserving in the marble of his art the imperishable qualities of our ephemeral lives. When it departs from such purposes, art raises up monstrous creations that quickly die out and may only be rediscovered

accidently, like primeval beasts thawing out of time's glacier.

Wilhelm Streit

The artist sits surrounded by the debris of his craft: paints, brushes, rags, jars. Waiting for the frozen river to flow.

4. X on the map.

Two thin intersecting lines of red ink.

That was the site of the city that Anton Sibelius would build. A railroad and a city in the mountains, to rival and surpass the domain of the Canadian Pacific to the south.

Sibelius read the official report of the Collie-Stutfield Expedition, the journals of Fleming and other surveyors, studied the maps. As a young clerk in the Hudson's Bay Company he saw Streit's painting at the Fort Garry headquarters:

Gentle green hills around a placid lake. Peaceable natives camped in the shade of giant trees. And far in the distance a mountain peak, weightless, serene, from which a fragile glacier wound a serpentine course. In the bright morning sunlight the avenues and spires of ice shone in the air like a celestial city.

A city amid the ice.

Trains carrying away the black diamonds of coal to a power hungry world. Trains disgorging fresh adventurers before a domed and turreted chalet. Trains equipped with refrigerator cars, packed with glacier ice, so that traveling dignitaries could dine on fresh lobster as they rushed along the plains, hundreds of miles from the sea.

The Collie report mentioned the dangers of the mountain terrain. How one of their number, a doctor afflicted with too much curiosity, fell into a crevasse and almost died. And the fact that the area was known by many travellers as Jasper.

Jasper. Sibelius consulted a dictionary. *A variety of quartz, chalcedony, semi-precious. To be clouded or variegated in color. From the Persian: "bringer of treasure." See Revelation 4 iii.*

The government, at the urging of Sibelius, sent another survey team to the Athabasca territory.

5. The American's oxcart rolled through a valley the color of bone. The flick of his willow rod dividing the silence.

A plain of desiccated grass, willows, sand dunes. The mountains swept up from this flat expanse, the lower slopes dark with trees, the peaks flecked with snow.

Swift crossed a land flat as a planed plank, his senses sharp for any trace of water. Now and then he found a rusted survey stake in his path.

The dry plain gave way to a belt of lush meadow, tall grasses. Swift headed into it and his ox sank to its haunches. He hauled the animal out, righted his belongings on the cart and went on.

He was in the heart of a muskeg. Gaunt spruce trees leaned crookedly over the moat that encircled them.

He found an arm.

An arm sticking up out of the spongy green earth. A bloodless arm in a tattered sleeve of black cloth. The hand, bone white, clutched a survey stake. Swift pried the stake out of the hand's dry grasp and checked its number. It was the one indicated on his map. This was the land he had filed for.

Swift took the stake with him, slung in his belt. The muskeg ran out and he pushed through a dense thicket of willows that scratched his face and tore at the canvas on his cart. A wheel jammed in the crevice of a split stone. Swift knelt to free it. Then he stood up. A gust of cool air stirred the leaves.

He knew then there was an open space just beyond the next stand of willows. The sound and smell of flowing water

reached him. He stepped from the thick brush into an open meadow by the river.

Into the midst of a herd of wild horses.

Swift stood motionless. The horses raised their heads from the grass they were feeding on and watched him. Their quiet shapes stood in the clearing like suddenly remembered dreams. Slowly, led by a dappled mare, the horses turned and moved away, down the long stretch of open meadow.

Swift glanced around in all directions. He knelt and drove the stake into the earth.

Several days later, while building his sod hut, Swift realized he was not alone in the valley. He saw the smoke of the metis settlement and went to investigate.

He found a group of women and children gathered around an outdoor campfire. Behind them, set back among tall pines, were several cabins, one of them unfinished, its freshly hewn log walls gleaming white in the shade. Some of the women spoke English. One of them, her name was Suzette, offered him something to eat. He peered into a black pot hanging over the fire and saw three rabbits, fur still intact, eyes gaping, turning in the bubbling water.

He smiled and nodded his head.

Fall came abruptly, a wall of cold air between him and the sunshine. He woke one morning to a different kind of silence and found snow falling everywhere: on the ground, in the trees, into the river.

He was cutting trees for firewood when he saw a man coming toward him across the snowy clearing. The stranger's voice, with its unmistakable English accent, carried through the still air.

Swift shouldered his axe and walked away without saying a word.

His cabin was finished. By the next summer he had broken land, planted wheat. Suzette came to live with him. They took one trip to Edmonton, for a marriage ceremony, and to bring back more supplies.

He knelt one bright morning and put his hand close to the earth. Felt a cool rivulet of air being sucked along, as though a giant were drawing breath.

The fire appeared suddenly on the crest of the bare hill. Smoke dragged behind the rushing flames like a grey cape. The wild grasses exploded into black ash as the heat roared over them.

The men gathered at Swift's, shouting to each other through the thickening smoke.

They fought the fire for the rest of that day and into the night. Swift was seen wherever the flames were thickest, swinging his shovel like a battle-ax. He peppered the bottom of a tin pail with buckshot, dunked it in the river, swung it at the end of a rope to spray water at the flames.

They fought for three days and nights, resting when the many smaller fires seemed to be vanquished, digging furiously wherever they leapt to life again. At night the men could see a constellation of smoldering embers in the blackness around their fields. They remained vigilant.

On the morning of the fourth day, rain fell out of a grey twilight that settled over the valley. The charred land steamed and hissed. The men--Viraj, the Moberly brothers, the Cardinals, Finlay, Mistaya--gathered around the place where Swift was standing. In the ashen gloom, the men looked into one another's smoke-blackened faces without recognition. Too exhausted to celebrate, they sat down together on the bare earth.

Swift looked across at Viraj.

You are the Englishman? he asked.

Viraj stared at him, comprehension slowly dawning, and then smiled.

Yes, I am.

Swift nodded, his face twisting into a grimace that could have been an answering grin.

You did good work.

Late that night Swift returned to his cabin. He did not sit down to the meal Suzette had ready for him. Instead he placed a phonograph on the Victrola, Caruso singing "Che gelida manina" from Puccini's *La Boheme*. He told Suzette to play it again and again, until he returned.

He took a shovel and went out. In the dark he found piles of smouldering embers, invisible in daylight, and smothered them in earth.

The smoke surrounded him. He put a wet rag over his nose and mouth. Found his way back to the cabin by the sound of Caruso's voice.

6. Pins on a distant map.

An item clipped from the *Times* (1907):

Jasper Forest Park, a national preserve, has been established by the dominion government, along the western boundary of the newly-created province of Alberta.

A railway is now proposed for this region, to rival the Canadian Pacific line to the south. The Jasper game and forest preserve, similar to that created at Banff, will ensure the virginal beauty of this remote wilderness is not defiled.

The mountain park is to be held in trust for future generations. Within its boundaries the animals cannot be hunted nor the land desecrated by private ownership and enterprise.

7. The settlers were given compensation and asked to leave the valley. Only those who had sanctioned business in the area, guides like Trask, were allowed to remain.

Swift's claim was inviolable because he had filed for homestead rights years before. The land was his. He had built on it, improved it, saved it from destruction by the forces of nature. After much deliberation by the officials in charge of the new park, he was allowed to remain on his land, and made a game warden.

He waited for the proposed new railroad, which was to come up the valley along the surveyed route. The line would have to pass through his property, raising its value beyond his capacity to calculate.

He wrote to a wealthy financier in the east. Months later, to his surprise, a letter of reply reached him.

The financier was interested. He had consulted with Sibelius and the survey crews. Swift's land was perfectly situated.

Together they envisioned a sprawling complex of rustic resort cabins, tennis courts, terraced slopes, swimming pools. And a name: Swiftholme.

Swift and the financier corresponded for months while the rail crew advanced across the prairies.

The typed letters on creamy imitation vellum were tacked up in a row on Swift's cabin wall. *From my partner,* he told visitors, with a casual tilt of his head toward the display of neat white paper.

8. Official records traced the provenance of the town's name to an early fur trader at the Hudson's Bay post, Jasper Hawes.

But the name was possibly derived, Byrne discovered, from the French phrase *J'espere*. I hope. An early surveyor spelled it *Jespare* in his published journal.

That would explain why one cartographer misheard the mention of this name and inked *Despair* on his map. Until he discovered the error, Sibelius could not understand the lack of enthusiasm shown by some investors.

In 1910 Byrne entered his own history.

The rail line, backed by new investors, reached the foothills. Byrne was the doctor for the mountain section of the line. He would return to London in the fall and another doctor would relieve him.

His field hospital was a giant canvas tent with a red cross painted on its broad roof, set up and dismantled periodically to be near the end of the steel as it advanced.

Accidents were frequent. Typhoid erupted in the crowded, unsanitary camps. Byrne was kept busy.

On the flats, where the Athabasca river widened into a shallow, sandy lake, the section foreman came into the hospital tent complaining of sunburn.

He had once helped build a railroad into the gold fields of Colombia. There, the trains often came under attack by bandits. The gold cars had to be sheathed in steel and guarded by armed men. But then the overloaded trains were swallowed up in the swamps.

Here, he said, *there is nothing. No gold in the rocks, in the rivers. Nothing but grass and wind. Why put in a railroad?*

Byrne applied an ointment to the foreman's face and neck. From outside came the shriek of a falcon. The two men looked past the tent flap snapping in the wind, at the bright wedge of sunlit dunes.

The foreman had a tale, one that Byrne methodically added to his notebook later that night.

To the foreman's crew, the nearby Swan glacier resembled a woman in flowing skirts. They nicknamed her Anastasia and joked about the spunk that would be needed to assail her icy virtue. One night the foreman saw this ice maiden at the window of his hut. Like moonlight she entered his sleeping compartment. She glided down to where he lay, whispering softly, and kissed him with frozen lips.

In the morning, the rail crew discovered that two hundred metres of track near the bunkhouse were buried under the snout of the surging Swan glacier.

They also found the foreman had contracted pneumonia from sleeping without blankets all night. He lay groaning, incoherent, in his bed.

Yep, I was babbling of green fields, the foreman said. *And the whore of Babylon, too, no doubt.*

The rail workers kept bonfires burning for two weeks, to speed up the melting of the glacier. At last the buried stretch of line was exposed. They shoveled away the heaps of slush and found a section of track torn up from its gravel bed, the two steel rails twisted around each other like twining snakes.

Byrne dislodged stones from the stream bed with a rusted railroad spike, a memento.

He was taken once on a speeder car to the construction site. There had been an accidental dynamite blast. A man was nailed to the rock by a flying spike.

The injured man stood upright, as if resting against the rockface. He was unconscious, his pinioned right arm held outstretched, his fingers closed tightly around the spike. Examining him, Byrne discovered he had been struck in the abdomen as well, perhaps by a fragment of rock.

There was no morphine. Byrne decided it would be best to wait for the end and then cut him down.

Toward evening the man woke up. One of the crewmen cut a cross out of blue paper. He held it up to the injured man, who stared at it, his lips moving noiselessly. The fingers of his pinioned hand opened like crimson petals.

The vigil beside the dying man lasted into the night. Byrne administered bromide of potassium as a sedative and

answered the man when he spoke out in fitful moments of consciousness. At times, the man's speech lapsed into Italian.

... *Maria... dolce... madre...*

At dawn, Byrne awoke to the sound of a giant heartbeat. The section crew was back at work, hammering down the rails.

Byrne held his magnifying lens to the man's mouth. There was no condensation.

With the coming of the railroad, Trask's fortunes blossomed. He had become a major outfitter and freighter along the line. Word of his resourcefulness and knowledge of the area traveled east to Sibelius.

Messengers from Sibelius came to talk with Trask. He hinted that he would like to visit Sibelius himself and discuss his ideas for business ventures in the new town. Sibelius sent a telegram: *I don't like speech. I prefer words on a page. They don't gesticulate. Write it all out and I'll consider it.*

Together they made plans for this town in the Rockies. They had bottled water served on the trains, and sent east to the cities, with labels that read:

Jasper's PURE

G L A C I E R

WATER

chipped by hand from the

Caves of Ice

at the heart of the

ARCTURUS *GLACIER*

in the Canadian Rockies

"water fresh from the eternal ice to you"

(available in plain or aerated varieties)

On a wet spring morning the new town was almost submerged.

A dam of ice formed downstream in the Athabasca River, and the banks were overthrown. Spruce trees stood in sudden lakes. Ducks and geese swam down the one street.

Bears driven from their feeding grounds clambered onto the roofs of unfinished houses.

The town began to sink into the thawing slush. The ground buckled and doors no longer closed. Headstones in the cemetery sank into the spongy earth, and coffins rose up like the prows of sunken ships.

The day was spent in frantic efforts to keep afloat, to salvage. The Park superintendent directed operations from his canoe.

Massive slabs of blue ice tumbled down the swollen river, surfacing and diving like sapphire dolphins. Trees were sheared off the crumbling banks.

The Anglican church, a hopeful wooden structure, collapsed during the night. The pews were swept away, the lectern ended up in a tree. In the morning the townspeople found a saint standing in the river, grounded upright on a gravel bar. The wooden statue wobbled unsteadily in the strong current, birds perched on one of its outstretched nutbrown arms.

It is said that after the Fall, the earth was thrown into violent upheaval.

Services were held in the basement of the billiard parlor until a temporary church could be built. Father Buckler vowed that some day a new church of rock would be built beside this river, a fortress to withstand the elements, a castle for the Holy Spirit, with thick stone walls, battlements, buttresses. High turrets and a lofty bell tower.

He preached to his sodden congregation in the damp basement.

Hosts of angels soared down to the earth to wreak the Lord's vengeance. They churned the sea, with their fearful trumpets weltered and blew it up into vast and terrible

waves. Mountains rose from the depths, earthquakes rocked the land. Islands broke away and drifted into the oceans, and on them godless men bred, bereft of the light of salvation. The animals fled from man and became strangers to him, just as the sea divides two nations.

These mountains are the evidence of that primeval cataclysm. Scientists attribute it to purely natural processes and I will not attempt to dispute them. But why, one has to ask, would such terrible heights and chasms exist? Perhaps they serve no better purpose than to remind us that the earth is a broken place, a ruin upon which the snow and ice has fallen like a cloak of shame.

Father Buckler turned the soaked, swollen pages of his prayerbook.

For lo, He casteth forth his ice like morsels, who is able to abide His frost?

Father Buckler was a cultured man. He read novels. He carried in the breast pocket of his clergyman's overcoat a soft leather copy of Flaubert's *The Temptation of Saint Anthony*.

For the possession of this book he suffered a thorn of conscience. He understood that an insidious form of sin may accumulate in the soul through the repeated act of reading for pleasure. The wing-like unfolding of the pages, their medieval texture in the candlelight, soothed him to complacency in the face of everyday evils.

To prevent this he tore every seventh page out of the book. Reminder of the seven deadly sins. He hoped this would bring about the slow atrophy of his curiosity. Instead he found his thoughts always turning to those missing pages and what they might have revealed.

He hiked out of town, into the wilderness, to tear up t[illegible] pages.

The day was hot, unlike most during this unusually cold and wet summer. Father Buckler struggled over stony streambeds, wandered farther afield than he had intended.

He found himself in a cirque of crumbling limestone that made him think of the Colosseum. A rock loosened by the day's heat fell from a nearby cliff face, clattering, bringing down a cavalcade of gravel in its wake.

Father Buckler crouched down by a thin rivulet of meltwater to quench his thirst. The water rushed loudly over the stones in its bed, tumbling them, knocking them together. Spirit rapping. He could hear nothing else. Someone, something, could have been standing right behind him and he would not know it.

He stood up quickly and glanced around. Solitude and an empty heaven.

Mouthing scripture, he scrambled back to town.

Then the devil leaveth him, and, behold, angels came and ministered unto him.

That summer, the Jasper Signal lamented that *the continuous continuing cold continues to continue.*

In the growing new town of Jasper, Byrne had to treat an alarming number of frostbite cases. The well buckets always came up filled with icy slush. More than one railworker complained that all he dreamed about at night were woolly mammoths.

Byrne walked around the town, past its cluster of newly white-washed buildings. He examined the soil, asked about the survey of the site.

For some time he was busy studying a detailed relief map. At last he wrote a letter to the barons of the railway.

The town you are building is situated on an ancient glacial moraine. One that still has a core of ice.

Plans were made to move the town further down the valley.

A site was selected that still allowed an excellent view of Meru and Arcturus. The trees were pared away, others brought in and planted in neat rows.

Arcturus glacier was visible, but from the station platform the unknowing eye might have passed it over as an insignificant patch of snow.

The barons put Trask in charge of the construction of a chalet at a middle distance between the town and the glacier.

Trask decided to have some sort of display set up on the promenade, a map that would point out to visitors just what it was they were seeing beyond the railings and the tended lawns.

Nunatak

These islands of rock rise above the surrounding ice.

The day after the glasshouse party, Byrne leaves the chalet and hikes along the river. He follows the windings of a sinuous esker to the site of the old settlement.

He is shocked to see the recession of the glacier, and the encroachments made by trees, grasses, flowers, into the rocky valley. The blue ice wall that once gleamed above the tiny cabins has retreated far up the valley. The cabins themselves are much farther from the riverbank than he remembers, tucked back in an unfamiliar stand of dark trees. The trading post is gone. He heard a rumor it was torn down by surveyors for logs to build a raft.

Sara's cabin has no door. Inside it is bare. A willow is growing through the window. In the silence he speaks aloud the words he imagined he would say to her.

Do you have any more stories to tell?

Byrne walks for an hour along Arcturus Creek before he reaches the till plain. This flat stretch of sand, gravel and braided melt streams has lengthened considerably. The plain is divided by outerworks of recessional rubble, resembling the concentric rings of an ancient celtic fortress. Each time he struggles to the top of one of the moraines, he finds that the glacier is still farther away than it seemed.

Twelve years before, when the expedition established its base camp here, the terminus was a high wall of cracked pinnacles surrounding a huge cave entrance. He fancied it resembled a giant marble foot, all that remained of some forgotten colossus. Now there is only a rounded slope that has unobtrusively buried itself in a mound of greyish muck.

Perhaps in this rational new century landscape is no longer allowed to be romantic.

Several days later Byrne hires one of Trask's guides to help him haul camping gear to the glacier. Hal Rowan, the-poet from England.

Byrne and Rowan ride out to the glacier, accompanied by a pack pony loaded with the doctor's gear.

Rowan sets up camp, cooks, and cares for the horses, while Byrne spends the day on the ice.

In the evening Byrne returns to camp, exhausted, sunburnt, taciturn. He sits under the hanging lantern, absorbed in his field notes and sketches.

Would you like some supper, doctor? Hal asks, holding up a plate of mutton stew. Byrne looks up in surprise, as if he has forgotten he is not alone.

Collie's Geographical Society report noted that Byrne's accident occurred just below the first icefall. Several yards from a large dome of rock, a *nunatak* as the Inuit named these solitary landmarks in a world of ice. In Europe they are called *rognons*, but here the native word, its harsh sound, seems more accurate.

Byrne finds the nunatak. He circumnavigates it, discovers a shred of faded green cloth clinging to a jagged outcrop. It could be a remnant of the wool scarf he was wearing the day of his crevasse fall.

He takes his bearings from the nunatak, marches several paces out onto the glacier surface. At the time of his fall, the ice was bare, glazed like peeled slices of blue fruit. Now there is a light dusting of fresh snow, but not enough to conceal crevasses or the undulations of the surface around them. There are none as far as he can see around him. He realizes it is foolish to make such a search anyway. The chasm into which he fell was no doubt long ago sealed up by the ceaseless forward flow of the glacier.

Then, this area of the glacier was treacherous. Now it is benign. The past has been swallowed up in its slow waves.

He reaches the icefall, where the glacier flows over a steep declivity in the bedrock. He can walk no farther, and now must climb. The glass mountain.

He takes the newly-purchased gear out of his rucksack, straps the claws onto his boots. Steps from sunlight into the chill penumbra of the icefall.

His axe crunches through the brittle surface. Into the harder layers beneath. He digs in with his lobsterclaws, hauls himself upward, carefully planning each movement, no matter how slight. Breathing in deeply, exhaling slowly.

The sun has come around and climbs with him, now an enemy. The ice weakens, releasing itself willingly into liquid all around him. He is climbing an emerging waterfall.

Breathing has become painful. He feels the jagged stone again, in the middle of his chest. After so many years he had thought it was gone, he had forgotten about it. His arms tire far too quickly. The collarbone that never healed properly has betrayed him. A sudden muscle spasm, a loss of concentration on this slippery terrain would be fatal. He is forced to retreat, to pick his way back down the wall.

In the field hospital he lies stretched on a cot with a hot water bottle pressed against his shoulder. From the saloon tent a piano plays delirious ragtime tunes. Laughter.

The clink of glasses. Near him, behind a white screen, someone is being sick.

The orderly brings beef tea in a feeding cup. *It was all I could find, doctor. The washing boy spent the day in some drinking hole. That's his raw spew disturbing your repose.*

Byrne lies back against the pillow. His body throbs, throwing off heat. In the cool dusk he is the sun's memory.

The gradual slopes of the lower glacier will be his domain, the edge of his known world. He will never see the icefield.

A late August snowfall brings summer to an end. The streets are filled with slush, creviced with wheel-ruts.

In the station, waiting for her train out of Jasper, Freya glimpses Byrne as she passes the smoking room. At least she thinks it is Byrne. She can only see the back of his head. He is reading.

She steps forward, then decides against it, having sensed his dislike for her at the glasshouse party.

The man she thinks is Byrne gets up abruptly and steps out the far door. Freya strolls casually through the room filled with blue smoke and men, glances down at the open book left on the table.

Swedenborg's *The True Christian Religion*. Lunatic theosophist stuff. She'd had it propounded to her by

melancholy, bejewelled women at her father's dinner parties. Her eyes take in just a few words before she moves past the table. *...it is wonderful that each one of them, in whatever direction he turns his body and face, sees the Lord in front of him.*

It could not have been Byrne, she decides, going back to the main hall. *Not that dry textbook of a man.*

Elspeth Fletcher sits in the chalet reading room, sipping hot Earl Grey tea from an eggshell china cup. Taking her one brief respite from the day's work.

From her window, she watches a climbing party struggle up the glacier against blowing snow. There are seven tiny figures huddled forward against the relentless blast. The alpinists from Zermatt.

She blows on the surface of the steaming tea, sips from it, raises her head and listens.

Above the sound of the wind, she hears the distant crack and crumple of an avalanche. The thin glass in the windowframe rattles. She glances out. The tiny climbers stand motionless, watching the graceful plume of snow that falls from the face of Mount Parnassus.

So thin and delicate from this distance. Byrne had said, at the glasshouse party, that there could be chunks of

ice the size of train cars falling in those powdery cascades.

Elspeth takes another sip of tea, pleased with the bitterness of lemon.

The day's tasks have been accomplished. Elspeth is exhausted. Her mind is a hawk, holding her limp body upright in its talons. She is little more than thought. She feels like light.

At this time of night she goes to the hot spring pool to be alone, to steam away this nervous energy. But tonight the Swiss alpinists are still there. They returned quite late from the glacier, shivering, wet, and hungry.

The alpinists are howling back at the coyotes on the dark hillside above the chalet, laughing and splashing. In from the cold and dark, they are giddy with joy at the comforts of civilization. Hot water, wine and cheese, the anticipation of a warm feather bed.

Elspeth steps out onto the promenade. She sees a tiny glimmer of light out in the darkness. A lantern. Someone is still walking on the glacier.

The doctor. She has hardly spoken to him since the glasshouse party last summer.

Elspeth makes an excursion to the till plain with Byrne. The weather this day has not turned out favorable. Clouds shroud the peaks and a cold mist descends everywhere. Byrne smiles apologetically. But Elspeth seems pleased, eager to keep hiking up the wet trail among the boulders.

I'm used to this, she says. *It's the Scot way of basking in the sun.*

A spruce tree appears ahead of them. Its branches emerge out of the haze into sudden sharp clarity. The tree is so vividly green in the shrouded landscape it seems to be the only real thing in a world of illusion. Byrne and Elspeth are shapes in the mist.

Trask is exuberant, light-hearted. The porcelain has arrived on this morning's train. Just in time for the royal visit from Sibelius. As the crates are pried open, Trask, hovering on tiptoe behind the haulers, breaks into a beatific smile. In the same tone he uses to calm a horse, he exhorts caution from the burly haulers, *easy now, gently, that's it,* as the luxuriant white array of washbasins and commodes is revealed in the raw Jasper air.

He touches the cold porcelain with reverent hands, as if it were the substance of civilization. No longer must everything that surrounds him, touches his skin, be made of wood, leather and iron.

Some of the townspeople believe Sleeping Beauty is their myth. Waking from a frozen slumber into the warm embrace of the twentieth century. Trask insists it was Byrne's discovery of the ancient moraine that first brought Jasper out of the ice age.

Now look at us, says Trask.

Silk trains rush through the valley, laden with costly fabrics from China, leaving a faint spice of the orient in their wake. Electric lamps line the main boulevard, not yet paved, it must be admitted, where women with parasols and men in white suits stroll.

The days when savage men wrestled with grizzly bears, or were said to have done so, have vanished in the glow of electric street lamps. In this new age, for good or ill, women attempt fields of endeavor that were once reserved only for men. Such as mountain climbing.

First it was that Mary Schaeffer who discovered Maligne Lake. Well, I can tell you it was one of my boys, guiding her, that saw it first.

And now this Miss Freya Croston. Freya. What kind of a name is that for a Christian woman?

Trask is talking too much and he knows it. He is nervous, perspiring. It hits him like a stomach punch: Sibelius and Freya's father are business acquaintances.

Sibelius, having at long last come to see the chalet he envisioned, sits across from him in the dining room, a glowing cigar never leaving his mouth. His solemn silence is a hole that Trask tries to fill up with words, sweating like a fireman shoveling coal to feed a dying locomotive engine.

Nothing is said, but Sibelius is clearly disappointed. Trask accompanies him onto his special train car. They head west, out of town, in silence. Several miles out the line passes along the edge of a steep gorge. Trask watches the baron's jowly face for any reaction to the sudden, terrifying view, one that has made many passengers gasp, cover their eyes, even faint.

To Trask's horror, Sibelius signals for a halt. Brakes squeal and cutlery clatters in the dining car.

The baron descends from the train and lumbers over to the edge of the gorge, whipping a silk handkerchief out of his breastpocket to wipe his glistening brow. Trask scrambles after him.

Do you see this? Sibelius huffs. He gestures at a stunted spruce that the wind has almost uprooted from its rocky foothold. The tree leans precariously over the drop, contemplating a final leap.

Unsightly, he mutters, shaking his head. He bends down wheezily, yanks at the trunk and is pulled off balance, his

polished black oxford's slipping on the wet stone. Trask lunges forward and grips his arm.

Hal Rowan returns to the bunkhouse after the reception for Sibelius. He takes off the ill-fitting suit and slips into a flannel shirt and wool trousers.

Pain twinges in his right hand. He holds it up, examines the bright red bead growing beside his thumbnail.

He peeled skin from his dry, calloused fingers all through the reception. Under the tablecloth. Removing himself from the tedium in strips.

From the pile of books in his steamer trunk he picks out Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* and falls back onto the bed.

The green fields of England. *Loveliest of trees the cherry now*.

He is suddenly aware of the smells and sounds surrounding him. The sharp tang of spruce, saddle oil, the blankets saturated with smoke, the snorting of horses in the corral.

He looks down at himself, his clothing, sees an actor in a wild west show.

Henry Charles Rowan first disembarked at the Jasper station on a chilly May evening. He was advised by telegram to wait for the carriage from the chalet.

A few tourists milled about, muffled in overcoats, stamping their feet in front of the stove. Voices were low and weak. Town full of strangers. Rowan found a vacant place on a hard bench and took a book from his traveling bag. Collie and Stutfield's *Climbs and Explorations*. A little boy in a navy jacket ran across the room clutching a toy Noah's Ark. He collided with Rowan's legs.

An explosion of wooden animals. Rowan caught one tiny figurine as it fell: a bird. He handed it to the boy who was kneeling, gathering his scattered menagerie. His mother, a young woman in a huge fur coat, smiled at Rowan and shooed the boy to a seat.

Carriages arrived and carried the tourists away to fireplaces and warm beds. The sound of harness bells, hooves on packed snow, growing distant. Soon there were only two people left sitting in the waiting room. Rowan and an old man across from him.

The stationmaster, chained to his pocketwatch, eyed them suspiciously.

From the office the telegraph of Lightning Bolt clicked at a breathless pace. Drowsily, Rowan wondered whether the receiver could sense the emotion of the sender in those disembodied dots and dashes.

The old man said a few words in a language Rowan did not understand. Smiling, he held up a bottle. Greek lettering. Retsina. Rowan declined with a shake of his head.

The next morning Rowan met his new employer, Frank Trask, at the chalet. Trask no longer personally supervised the pack trains. But this day he came out decked in his old boots, dungarees and buckskin jacket to welcome Hal. He showed him around the bunkhouse, the stables and the corral. He strode across the yard, Rowan following cautiously, sidestepping mounds and yellowish puddles.

Trask initiated his new recruit in the arcane science of the diamond hitch.

That's more like the Gordian knot, son. Here, let me show you.

Henry Rowan was to be the showpiece of Trask's guiding operation. He was direct from England, a young literary lion. Last year, at the age of twenty-one, he had published a book of poetry, *Empty and Waste is the Sea*. Somewhere he had learned to ride, passably, and aim a rifle, and if that awkward shyness left him he could charm the ladies. What he didn't know about trail life and packhorses young O'Hagan and the other guides could teach him. As it is now they ride circles around him.

Celeste is in love with Rowan. Sir Galahad, the other chambermaids dubbed him.

Elspeth watches her. This girl is a long way from her home town. Nervous, often cries at night, she is told. Has to be reprimanded for chewing her fingernails, as it is unsightly to the guests. And now she is in love.

At the chalet staff picnic Hal sat with Celeste on the green sloping bank of Lac Beauvert. He quoted Yeats, his favorite poet, to describe her hair. For a few moments they held hands. Then a young woman Celeste had never seen before stepped up and led him away for a canoe trip on the lake. He smiled at Celeste as he was led away.

Now Celeste sees Rowan only from a distance, always in the company of that young woman. She is Freya Croston. The scandalous lady alpinist, they call her, who wears men's trousers. Her face is ruddy, prematurely wrinkled by wind and sun, but her eyes are a beautiful, watery blue.

She made a special demand for Rowan's services this summer. He helps her gather supplies and choose packhorses. They will be together, in isolation, for days.

Elspeth finds Celeste in the front parlor, sitting at the window. She has put together a tray of tea, orange marmalade, and biscuits. It is four o'clock in the morning.

Celeste smiles at her. She hold a tea cup to her lips and bites a piece out of it.

Like a ghost, Swift appears at Byrne's side in the hospital tent. The doctor is surprised. He had no idea the American had stayed on his land. No, the old man says impatiently, he isn't in need of any medical attention. He never will be. He leans close to Byrne.

I heard your name when the surveyors stopped at my place. I thought you might know something about the situation here. They were supposed to make me an offer.

Who?

The Lords of the Iron Horse. The bastards skirted my property by a few hundred yards. Because I reported their surveyors for poaching. And they damn well were.

The old man mentions his benefactor, who remains only a name on a yellowing stack of letters. He never appeared in the flesh. Swift wants to know if Byrne has heard anything of him.

I'm asking you because I don't trust the others.

Swift whispers the financier's name. Byrne knows it, having read in the papers of his grandiose plans for developing the west. Recently the papers also listed him as one of the dignitaries invited on the maiden voyage of the Titanic.

If Swift is crushed by the news, he does not let it show.

Come out to my place tomorrow, for dinner, he tells Byrne. *We're not fancy, but you'll get a good meal.*

I was wondering about Sara, Byrne said. *The woman who took care of me after I fell in the crevasse. Do you know what became of her?*

Swift scowls, shakes his head.

They all scattered. West over the pass, north to the Smoky country. Nobody kept track.

He allows himself a grey smile.

But I'll be here, till doomsday. The barons had their chance. Now I'm going to sit in the middle of their pretty park like a rusty spike.

When a respite comes in Byrne's duties, he gathers supplies for the execution of his plan. Prismatic compass, clinometer, steel tape for baseline measures, red paint for marking stations. He heads out, alone this time, to the glacier.

He places a line of stones across the ice surface, stretching from one lateral moraine to the other. Every week he returns and checks the alignment of the stones, fills a table with numbers.

By calculating flow rate, one should be able to predict the approximate time it would take an object imbedded at a

particular location in the ice to travel to the terminus and melt out.

He soon fills a notebook with observations.

The branches of the trees all grow to one side of the trunk, away from the knife wind blowing off the ice. Ragged pennants.

The rock surrounding Arcturus Glacier is mainly dark, slaty limestone, fossiliferous in places. It was deposited over millions of years on the floor of a shallow sea. The sea floor then buckled and was heaved up into mountains by some force as yet undetermined by science.

The fossils in the rock provide evidence for what kind of life existed at the time the sediments were laid down. At least the kind of life that leaves fossils.

Stones, fragments of a lost continent, lie scattered in the dirty snow of the till plain. Grey breccia splashed with orange rust, flecks of acid green, purple and white veins.

The enchantment of these mute fragments is undeniable. The bewitching garden of signs. Down among the cool stones

one might not perceive the burning light rays refracted off lingering patches of summer snow, until it is too late.

Freya leaps. She arrows into the water, slips beneath the broken surface. Her body ripples under the waves, as if slipping away into dream.

Elspeth watches her from the steps in the shallow end of the pool. Freya's head rises from the dark water, sleek, face and pale shoulders steaming in the cool night air. She smiles, wades toward Elspeth.

Yes, you were right, this is heavenly.

In certain conditions of wind and sunlight, glacial ice evaporates immediately, without passing through the liquid stage. This is called sublimation, a more refined form of melting.

The phenomenon is often accompanied by a rhythmic crackling sound, as if invisible feet were stepping across the ice.

Light acts strangely in this place. It has substance, life: it bobs, spills, dances, changes direction. It appears

and disappears suddenly, it changes color when you examine it too closely. The atmosphere seems to catch the light like wind, and billows.

An exposed ice surface often displays a dull, undifferentiated facade. The intricate crystalline structure, however, can be revealed, by pouring a warm liquid over the ice. Urine is the most readily available reagent for this purpose. It will seep into the spaces between the crystals and disassociate them briefly, long enough for the pattern of formation to be examined.

Arctic. The word, casually mentioned by Byrne during a conversation in the chalet, provides Trask with the seed for a new promotional brochure.

"Scientists tell us that the altitude of the Rockies has created an Arctic landscape in miniature. A world of hardy animals, tiny flowers, never-melting ice.

This means that you can now journey to the polar regions without leaving the comfort of your rail car. See a world that only a few brave explorers have seen."

Trask paces the deck of the chalet. He is mildly troubled by something else Byrne mentioned, the undeniable fact that the glaciers are now receding. Not by much every year, it is true, a few feet, but the rate could increase, the doctor said, given the trend to warmer weather in the past few seasons. In time, decades or centuries away, but then again perhaps in Trask's own lifetime, there may be nothing left for visitors to see. It seems ironic to Trask, a cruel whim of of this beautiful land, that the ice should be slowly disappearing at the same time that someone has finally found a use for it.

Byrne reads the glacier's writing.

Tiny fragments of hard quartz, frozen to the basal surface of the glacier, scar the limestone bedrock as the ice flows forward.

This undersurface, visible from inside an ice cave at the terminus, although deceptively smooth and glossy like an artificially polished gemstone, is studded with small grains and fragments of rock.

The shiny polish, the fine striations, and irregular chock marks which occur in the underlying bedrock result from contact with the ice as it makes its journey down the mountain.

Byrne makes careful observations of these striation patterns. Crossing the till plain he finds a drumlin on which the striations are wavy and realizes it is a petroglyph. Carved by someone in prehistory. A radial series of lines around a central disc. Perhaps a representation of the sun.

While he crouches on the hard clay of a dry rivercourse to eat his packed lunch, he thinks of a game. What would be the petroglyph to represent himself? He scratches in the clay with his finger. Sketches a stick figure, then crosses it out.

What could represent Elspeth?

He climbs a huge erratic at the edge of the north lateral moraine, finds a river of striations in the rock and follows it. Where the lines submerge underneath the shell of ice there is a labyrinth of scars. They cross and recross the natural markings like a palimpsest. Fossil worm tracks, Byrne thinks, then moves closer.

There are human figures, distorted, but recognizable in various poses: fighting, hunting, giving birth. And other figures, more like animals. Interweaving among the human

shapes. And curving lines like the traceries of braided streams. Circles. Arrows. Stories.

He traces a frieze along the flank of the cabin-sized boulder.

Confusing everything is the presence of the glacial scars. Straight lines. They lure his linear mind's eye into following them, away from the human carvings.

The intaglio cannot be a history. It does not flow in an orderly sequence.

Following lines, tracing, taking notes. So that he can avoid leaving the glacier, he makes a cache of food under some morainal rubble and sets up a canvas tent on the till plain. He bathes in the meltwater fall, where it spills into a rock basin. Along the crevices of his wind-hardened face, and in the wings of his nose, every morning he finds and scrubs out fine white powder, rock flour.

He invites Rowan to hike up with him and look at the petroglyphs. Perhaps a poet can help him find patterns, identify motifs.

Hal silently runs his hand over the scars in the rock.

They're strange, wonderful. But I confess I don't understand.

A record of communal memory. Or a prediction. Or both. Or a panorama of things that never could happen, dreamed in some solitary vision.

There are no winged figures.

This may be an alphabet, Hal says. *Or a dictionary.*

There are many stories. Byrne makes summaries, conjectures.

Woman, in a river? Escapes battle, massacre of her people by enemy tribe. Runs away to (from?) forest, lives with rocks, standing stones. The rocks stand in a ring. Erratics? She walks between two of them. Then a space, nothing.

Further along the carving the woman reappears (or is it in fact same one?) Spirals around her. She faces the other way now, west (?), going up into the sun.

The story is there, as far as Byrne can tell, although he knows he himself has created it out of intersecting icons that may not be related.

The carvings have been here for an unknown length of time. Not waiting for him to come close and scrutinize them under his magnifying lens. These scratches have nothing to do with his presence, they do not anticipate him, prophecy him.

He continues his study of the glacier.

The time of greatest melt activity is in the afternoon. Rivulets and trickles on the glacier surface swell into rushing torrents. Hillocks and banded fonts form on previously level stretches. Passage becomes difficult.

A large crater-like depression on the glacier slowly fills with water. By early evening it has become a lake, perfectly transparent, filled with the purest water on earth. There are no fish in its depths, no sedges or grasses along the shore. No geese, no shore birds gather here at dusk.

Each night, as the meltwater lessens, the lake subsides. In the morning it has vanished again.

As the glacier flows forward, its topography will inevitably change, and the lake will vanish. For that reason, its ephemerality, I see no reason to give this body of water a name. It remains the ideal lake.

Rowan throws the pack to the ground.

Blankets and gear are strewn all over the makeshift camp, drying after the plunge in the Whirlpool River. Clothes hang dripping from the boughs of pines. The horses have wandered into the meadow. The tourists from Chicago have gone off for a stroll, up onto the windy hillside for a better view of the valley.

Aftermath of the bloody deluge. Rowan sets the pack contents out around him to survey the extent of the damage. The flour is a doughy mass, mixed now with the cocoa. The bannock he had made that morning ruined. He finds the waterproof container of matches, crouches down by the fire pit, stripped to his soaked trousers, shivering.

I see a pool of water on the bleached nunatak and the sparsity of the landscape draws me to it. Water. The pool is perfectly transparent, fringed with spring ice. Fed by a thin rivulet that spills with the clarity of music from the glacier. I cup my hands and drink.

I lie back on the sun-warmed rock, close my eyes, and listen. The glacier moves forward at a rate of less than one inch an hour. If I listen carefully I can hear it wash up against this rock island, break like waves, and become water.

In the meadow of flowers floats a white silk pavilion. Men and women with glasses of champagne and slices of cake stroll beneath its billowing walls. The members of the alpine club are celebrating the summer's successful climbs.

Rowan leads his horse along the edge of the wet meadow, back to the camp. The buzz and shimmer of insects fills the humid sunlit air.

His name is called from across the bright space. He stops. Freya is standing at the pavilion entrance with her camera. She shouts, waves him over.

Byrne imagines himself as an alpine Alexander Selkirk, set down here on this island in the ice at his own request. Lying back on a flat slab of limestone, he watches high cirrus clouds form and dissipate. They appear out of nothing, out of empty blue space.

Swans. Nana called them the children of Lir.

The remains of a shelter built on the nunatak by a group of lost climbers becomes Byrne's scientific observatory. With help from Rowan, he enlarges the rock structure, reinforces it with a wooden framework, a door. He and Hal hollow out an area for a fireplace and build a mantle of stones around it. He lines the walls with furs and spreads canvas and oilcloth on the floor.

Byrne installs a heater, a camp bed, a pine table and chair. He builds shelves and stocks them with books, medical and scientific supplies in glass-stoppered bottles, tins of evaporated vegetables, tapers, cooking utensils. He sets a spirit lamp in one wall and a desk clock above the

fireplace. Next to the clock he places a sea urchin shell, the only surviving relic from his childhood.

Because the door has no lock, he calls this shelter his hostel. Ice climbers often find the hut, wait out bad weather here, leave their names and the date of their stay scratched in the rock wall. Many of them, he imagines, think they have discovered a dwelling abandoned for years.

Byrne settles in for the night, as a trial of the hut's comfort. He builds a fire, wraps himself in a sleigh blanket, and sits at his table to write by the light of the lamp.

As it grows late and the temperature outside drops, the sound of trickling water ceases. The fire has died to embers. He is at the heart of stillness. This could be the moon.

The hut is insulated well enough that he is uncomfortable in the blanket, and sloughs it off. He removes his vest and shirt, and his shoes. He writes for a while in his undershirt and trousers, then pushes the chair back. The heat is palpable, a thick garment wrapping his skin.

He opens the door of the hut and steps out onto bare rock, holding a lighted lantern over his head. The cold stuns him.

Space blooms with stars.

In the blackness below he searches for landmarks.

The icefield chalet is the nearest habitation. He can see the lamps along its promenade that give it the look of an ocean liner. The tall windows filled with light.

To study accurately the variations in temperature and flow rate, it was necessary to live on the glacier for several consecutive days.

When the temperature drops at dusk to below zero, all the streams on the glacier surface cease to flow. Everywhere the ice bristles up with glittering frost needles as the melted and now refreezing surface water dilatates. A garden of tiny ice flowers seems to be growing all around me.

Coming back down into the valley. The mountain walls sweep up on either side. To the left, snow and ice blanket the rock. To the right, the slopes are green.

A raven is flying away from me, high in the air. It does not keep on a line, but weaves from one side to another in a looping, twisting pattern. Just before it fades out of the range of my vision, it veers toward the left, comes into

sharp focus again against the white of snow, spirals down into a glacial side valley.

Why would it choose the dead side? Erratic behavior.

No. There is a logic in its choice. For the scavenger, meals show up much more clearly, and more often, in the snow.

Glacial ice is not a fluid, nor is it a solid. It is unique substance, liquid stone, relict and shape-changer.

The glacier appears motionless, timeless. But it changes as each day proceeds. Plowing slowly forward, inexorable, blind force. Crevasses split open and others close. There are icequakes, unpredictable geysers of meltwater. And acts of delicate precision: tiny shards of rock are plucked by the ice from their strata, carried miles down the ice stream, and left lying next to fragments from another geological age.

As the ice recedes, a new landscape is revealed, one that ignores the orderly arrangement of the past. The glacier is a source of terra incognita.

Seracs. Massive, unstable pinnacles of ice often form in the icefall.

Here, as the glacier flows over a steep grade in the bedrock, internal stresses split and tear the ice. It buckles and heaves into a tortuous topography.

Byrne watches over several days as an architectural wonder is created. The glacier groans, cracks, thunders, and rears up a cathedral.

When the sun breaks through cloud, the cathedral fills with light. The warmer air hollows it into a more baroque, flamboyant shape. Spires, archways, gargoyles begin to flow, waterfalls set festive ice bells ringing.

Then, slowly, the balance that kept it aloft is undermined. Even as light glorifies it, the cathedral is diminished, begins almost imperceptibly to fall. Subterranean booms and crashes attest to hidden vaults and hollows, the shifting instability of the foundation.

No-one can predict exactly when a serac will give way and topple back into the landscape. Byrne keeps careful watch over the course of several days, but one morning he comes out of his hut to find that the cathedral is gone, swallowed up in its demesne.

When the poplar leaves turn yellow, and snow dusts the peaks, Byrne returns to England, to his practice there.

Now he comes to Jasper every spring, no longer as a doctor, but as an amateur glaciologist. He spends the

summer, usually in shirt sleeves, scrambling around on the moraines, on the ice surface.

When he sees Elspeth in town, she chides him affably for spending his entire summer in winter.

He asks Lightning Bolt, the old man in the telegraph office, for messages from home. There are few, and few to be sent.

There are days when Byrne's body temperature falls alarmingly. He sinks unaccountably into lethargy, torpor.

This has happened to me ever since the accident, he tells Elspeth. *It's like a recurrence of the hypothermia.*

It's no wonder, she says. *You tramp around in the mank all day.*

Three times a week, at Elspeth's suggestion, Byrne immerses himself in the sulphurous waters of the hot spring.

Elspeth spreads a fresh white cloth on the table. She sets out two places of the best china, two crystal goblets, a bottle of port and a carafe of water.

The arrangement needs something more, she decides. Something that Byrne will appreciate. She goes out to the garden and cuts a handful of lilies.

Are the flowers here less conscious than English flowers?

Byrne remembers with surprise his botanical collection. The orchids and other exotic blossoms that could be compared to or contrasted with similar species found in tropical zones. Such flowers only grow in the humid sheltered valleys of the Rockies. In this scoured landscape he never sees them.

He is now more intrigued by the tiny alpine wildflowers and lichens that grow amid the rock and ice. He studies them where they are found, in the crevices of rocks, on the nunatak. Within an apparent desert of water, soil, shelter, they will find the merest sliver of cold sunlight and bloom.

She courts Edward Byrne. Quietly, unobtrusively, over the course of many summers. He takes her for long walks through the valley, finds unexpected pleasure in sharing his knowledge of the alpine landscape.

He is walking across the till plain, toward the town. He picks his way unconsciously over rocks and rivulets of meltwater. Suddenly he realizes what inner landscape is guiding him forward. Elspeth stands alone against a pale, indistinct background that is Jasper. She is the solitary figure in that blurred field.

He turns and climbs back up to his shelter on the nunatak.

Trask cannot understand Elspeth's attraction to Ned Byrne.

He's a cold man. No passion. He's spent so much time on the glacier I'll bet he pisses ice water. The only time he ever got emotional about anything was when the road crew cut down one of his favorite trees.

The golden northern bumble bee (Bombus fervidus), often seen high in the alpine zone. Perhaps one could cultivate the honey. Then all you'd need would be locusts and the skins of wild beasts.

Trask has a diorama constructed for the chalet lobby. With tiny scale models of the town's buildings, the surrounding peaks. The inconveniently vast icefield is truncated by the edge of the display.

Ariel View of Jasper and Environs

To accompany Trask's diorama, with its interestingly misspelled inscription, Byrne writes a short primer on ice ages and glaciers:

The icefield is the source of several major river systems. It is a storehouse of fresh water. The ice deep within it may be hundreds of years old, formed from snow that fell here before the voyage of Columbus, before the birth of Shakespeare, before the industrial age.

He writes of the Swiss glaciologist Louis Agassiz, his discovery of the *Eiszeit*, the great ice age of the past:

The land we call Europe, at that time a tropical jungle inhabited by elephants, enormous reptiles and gigantic tigers, was swiftly buried beneath a great sheet of ice covering valleys and mountains, leveling all forms of nature into one vast expanse of silent death.

Agassiz thought that each ice age obliterated life from the earth, and that each warming period brought about an entirely new creation. That would explain, he conjectured, all the gaps in the record of prehistoric animals.

The entire historical period has occurred in a brief respite of warmth during such an ice age, like an alpine flower during its short growing season, between snow melt and snow fall. The ice forced the human species to wander in search of food, to forge new tools, to plan in order to

survive. Some believe it is to the ice we owe our swift transition to civilization.

No-one can say exactly what caused the ages of ice. Or when our "brief summer" is fated to end.

Trask is pleased with Byrne's commentary. Tourists will have the model, the text, and a view of the real thing. Prehistory will come alive for them, they will commemorate the moment with postcards, souvenirs, photographs.

In his enthusiasm Trask also considers a dome of blue glass over the whole model, to show how the site where the town lies was once submerged under ice. He then decides that would be too frightening, and might possibly offend the religious.

Byrne thinks it strange, how the ice has become so important to him.

Once this world had been on the periphery of his vision, a marginal space from which one returned. Now it is the centre of his field of vision. And more than central: inevitable. From this vantage point, his life could have gone no other way.

The contours of the icefield, even those he cannot see and must envision from the maps of others, now seem to

embody a form he has sensed vaguely all his life. His imagination moves inside of and charts its new geography.

They found the poor fool lying there, refrigerated on his trapline.

Frank Trask steps into the chalet barber shop for his morning shave. Scrapes his muddied shoes on the sill. Byrne is seated in the one chair, his eyes closed while George the barber lathers on the tall tales and soap.

His friend wanted him spruced up for the funeral, so they brought him to me. Well, I tried my best, but the soap was too warm, it congealed on his frozen face. In the end I had to use a chisel to get him shaved. And you know, that was one of the best damn shaves I ever gave anybody, quick or dead.

Trask sees Byrne's face emerge as the razor slides through lather. He remembers the lacquer of ice on Byrne's beard when they brought him down from the glacier after his crevasse fall. With his eyes closed he looks much the same now as he did then, hauled up over the lip of the chasm.

Among the distinguished visitors to the park this year were Sir Arthur and Lady Conan Doyle and party. They visited

a number of points of interest and expressed themselves delighted with everything they saw. Sir Arthur kindly gave his assistance and practical knowledge to the laying out of a nine hole golf course on a plateau overlooking Jasper townsite and close to the site of the proposed Grand Trunk Pacific Hotel. He also took a turn at bat with the local baseball club, and made several excursions to see the sights of our wilderness playground.

Byrne meets the creator of Sherlock Holmes at one of Elspeth's glasshouse receptions. He has heard that Sir Arthur, a doctor, is also a spiritualist, a collector of the unexplained. He offers to take him on a guided trek to the glacier. Doyle accepts enthusiastically.

Trask grimaces, envisioning wasted time, a broken ankle, bad press.

The two doctors hike slowly across the till plain. Sir Arthur stops often to examine the wildflowers. He marvels at the sky: the change in colour, depth. The purity and sharpness of the air.

They eat their lunch of sandwiches and lemonade sitting perched on a glacier table.

Small, dark stones are scattered over the flat surface of the rock upon which they sit.

They look arranged, Sir Arthur says. *Purposefully.*

He picks up several of the stones, examines them like evidence, clues.

Crawling across the gritty snow of the lower glacier, a spider. Sir Arthur sees it first.

Byrne scoops it up with a handful of snow into a specimen jar. Ties a piece of surgical gauze around the rim, places the jar on a shelf when they reach the shelter, intending to examine it when he has more time.

Months later, while searching the shelf for a bottle of camphor salve, he finds the jar. The snow has long since melted and evaporated. At the bottom of the jar lies a desiccated black speck. Byrne shakes it out onto the palm of his hand. Under the magnifying glass he counts eight eyes, notes the mottled coloration on the thorax.

The spider's legs uncurl and it scuttles across Byrne's palm. He flicks it back into the jar. Takes the jar with him when he strolls out onto the glacier that evening, sets the spider back on the snow.

The next summer Byrne finds a pocket flask and a tattered copy of Shakespeare's historical plays near a circle of campfire stones. The pages of the leatherbound book are swollen from years of exposure to wind and rain,

the print faded, but in many places miniscule marginal notes can be seen.

He examines the book thoroughly. On the inside of the front cover is a heraldic family crest: on a field of azure, a celestial city, proper, with the motto: *J'espere.*

This book may have been lost by Sexsmith, Byrne speculates in his notebook, *or abandoned by the surveyors after they had plundered the old trading post.*

Almost all of the marginal notes concern the plays. But in the last pages are a few scratchy lines about the icefield. And a hastily scribbled map with a blank area at its centre. Byrne enters everything into his own journal. He pieces together the final hours of Sexsmith's quest.

Before them lies a plain of snow. On all sides lone peaks rise like islands above the horizon. Sunlight gleams on the snow cap of the highest summit, far across the plain from where they stand.

The Stoney brothers build a tiny fire in the lee of a rock outcrop at the edge of the open expanse, with scraps of wood saved from the last encampment.

Sexsmith says nothing. He stares out at the white expanse, brooding. While the Stoney brothers cook a meal, Sexsmith goes for a walk into the fading light of dusk. The wind is savage, relentless. It is obvious that no animals come here to graze. There is nothing to hunt, there will be

no way to replenish the food supply. All that he sees is stale, flat, unprofitable.

He has left his journal with Viraj. The only book he carries with him now contains the Bard's most uninspired creations. He tries to read, but his eyes are too sore. Instead he makes a few marginal notes, pushing the pen with numb, blistered fingers to form words he can barely see.

In the raw morning, Sexsmith sips his tea while the Stoney brothers pack up the camp.

Sexsmith spills a few drops of tea onto the snow at his feet. They disappear instantly, even the color absorbed into the white surface.

He digs with his alpenstock. There is a faint blue shadow in the hollow where the spilled liquid fell. He crouches, scoops up snow with his gloved hands. Strikes a hard surface. Crystalline.

He understands now that he is walking across a bowl of ice on the top of the world. The glaciers have been spilling from its brim.

Nothing. A dreary waste of snow and ice.

Sexsmith gives in to his dismay and weariness, a burst of childish anger at the calm silence of the brothers. He

stalks out into the white expanse, laughing, hacking at the snow crust with his alpenstock.

I am here, great ice spirits. Strike me down if you dare.

He stumbles, shakes his head, and turns back.

They make it to the base camp that evening. In his journal, the pages blotched with frozen tears from his inflamed eyes, Sexsmith writes nothing about the plain of ice. Only the date and

Disappointment.

But was that all? Byrne wondered. Why would he keep silent? Unless he had glimpsed something that only a madman would claim to have seen.

After many notebook pages of measurement and calculation, Byrne writes down a year, places a question mark beside it. In the summer of that year, he estimates, the section of ice into which he fell will have reached the terminus of the glacier, and will begin to melt. Whatever is embedded within it must by the laws of nature reappear.

Ablation Zone

The boundary between the inviolate and the melting zones of a glacier is often sharply defined. When Byrne crosses it he thinks of Elspeth.

Melting can be hastened by any increase in heat at the terminus of a glacier, such as the flash bulbs of hundreds of cameras.

In July the alpine club gathers at Arcturus creek.

The campfire dies to pale embers, the conversation with it. Out of the dark beyond the faint circle of light, a man's voice.

I hope I don't intrude?

The man's face cannot be seen. He sits down on the bare earth across from Freya, unacknowledged by the others there. The flare of a match appears for a moment, a hand cupped around the bowl of a pipe.

They are discussing the quality of the rock in the region. The stranger says nothing for a while, and then begins quietly to speak.

It's true, he says. *The rock is not very good for climbing.*

And he continues in detail about the composition of several rockfaces, the various grades of limestone and quartz. Freya follows his words for some time, but then, lulled by the fire's warmth, she listens only to the rhythms and inflections of the voice. After a while she feels she is floating in space, buoyed up on the rising and falling of the stranger's somehow familiar voice.

She can hear, rolling underneath the cold technical language, a turbulence of desires and emotions. She cannot interpret them. This is a voice out of the dark.

Then the voice stops. The stranger bids everyone a good night. The swish of his long coat, his footfalls, recede into the cold dark beyond the circle of bodies. Freya turns to Hal.

That was Doctor Byrne she says, realizing it even as she speaks his name.

When the fire has died completely, violet bands of aurora borealis appear in the night sky. Freya and Hal watch them shimmer, fade and reappear, change their spectral colors. Freya remembers a story she was told as a child.

The lights came from the radiance of a beautiful ice maiden. She lived far in the north, and her coldness repelled all suitors. But the king of elves and flowers fell in love with her, and his desire melted her frozen heart. That is how spring came.

Freya visits Byrne at his shelter. She arrives at dawn. Trask had asked Byrne to attend the alpine club meetings, as his knowledge of the area would be valuable to the assembled climbers. But Freya could not wait.

If you go up the glacier, stick to the south moraine. Byrne tells her. *Less melting and crevasse activity in the mountain's shadow.*

What about the icefield itself? she asks. To her surprise he looks vaguely embarrassed, uncomfortable. He runs a finger along the spine of a book on his desk.

I've never actually seen it. Since the crevasse accident I can't climb steep gradients. My arm gives out. So I'm limited to the lower reaches.

She looks at him, wide-eyed.

That's ridiculous. You can come with us. We'll help you on the difficult pitches....

He shakes his head.

I'm really no climber. I would endanger the two of you.

She argues. He is a wall of rock. She does not like to yield, but his refusal is final. She snaps at him in frustration.

So what can you know about this place if you've never been up there? What have you learned?

He smiles coldly.

I've learned a lot from the glacier. Patience. Control of the emotions.

She shakes her head, concedes defeat, asks to take his photograph. He agrees, realizing that this will be the first time he has been captured on film since he first left England.

After she snaps the picture, she brandishes her camera and says,

I'll bring the icefield back to you with this.

He asks her to take note of anything unusual.

How do you define unusual? she asks, studying him. *I'm not sure I'd know what to look for.*

He meets her inquiring gaze, glances away abruptly.

Anything unexpected.

Freya and Hal plot the climb, pointing out topographical features on the chalet diorama. Rowan has climbed before, but not on ice. They practise belays, cutting ice steps, glissades.

They try to avoid Trask. He would recommend a team approach, six or seven climbers. Even though this will not be a first ascent, nor an especially difficult one. He would frown upon Freya's choice of Hal, who is not an official climbing guide. He would take over the entire expedition.

I know the mountain has been climbed before, Freya tells Hal. *But not by me. That's all that matters.*

They hike to the mountain's base every day, and climb adjacent hills to get a better view. Through his field glasses, Hal picks out an unusual pattern on a snow slope of Meru. A series of vertical lines, blue-shadowed corrugations in the snow.

Those lines are larger than they look from here, Freya says. *More like vertical hillocks when you're traversing them, which I personally like to avoid. In India some of the climbers call that effect Parvati's Curtain.*

Byrne's shelter becomes their base camp. From the glacier they will traverse across part of the icefield, to reach the less precipitous slope of Meru.

The bergschrund to the north wall is safely crossed. They step onto icy limestone. From here it will be a short vertical pitch to the icefield.

They discover a niche, a place to huddle and rest for a moment. They edge toward it. A knife wind off the ice above whips spindrift into their eyes. Hal stumbles, blinded. He slips on verglas, slams his knee painfully against the rock.

Freya kneels beside him, clutches his arm. For a moment she is a stranger, the haze of whirling snow like a filter across his memory.

What am I doing here with this person?

She helps him to his feet.

An overhanging carapace of ice, hollowed underneath by melting, forms a dome illuminated momentarily by the sun. Freya hacks steps to it, and Hal follows.

They stand together, watching as capillaries of water run and swirl along the translucent ceiling of the dome. The thin trails flow together, form into droplets that spill all around them. They can see a labyrinthine network of interlacing rivulets, lit by the sun, threading among the rounded crystals of the deliquescent ice.

They are watching, Hal imagines, the life processes of some glass-shelled living creature.

With field glasses Byrne keeps watch on Meru. He knows the two climbers will not be visible until they reach the peak. He hopes then to catch a glimpse of them. Freya agreed she would flash a mirror when they reached the summit cornice.

The first night on the mountain is spent at the edge of the icefield, in the lee of a rock buttress. In a wedge tent lit by a hanging lantern. They suck pastilles to soothe their burning throats. Hal brews coffee on the portable camp stove, mixes it with rum in aluminum cups.

Fists of wind hammer the walls of the tent.

They are alone together. Out on the mountain they were kept distanced by the rigours and formalities of the climb. Now they are inches away from each other in this tiny tent. They make halting conversation about the wind, the cold, the next day's climb. Rowan sits uneasily under the swinging light that seems a figure of their unspoken thought, leaping from one to the other. He pretends to write in his journal.

Freya takes a porcelain pipe and a smoking kit from her rucksack. She fills the pipe, lights it, and leans back against her rucksack to smoke.

The look on your face, she laughs, handing the pipe to Hal. As he takes it she says with mock solemnity,

I should warn you, that's not any ordinary fine cut.

He sniffs at the sweetly pungent smoke curling out of the pipe.

This is... hashish?

She nods. *I first encountered it in Darjeeling. Wonderful for fatigue, nervous strain.*

He attempts a knowing smile.

The air's a bit thin up here for that, isn't it?

She grimaces. *For God's sake.*

Again he is the novice. With her, his only role. He takes a long drag on the pipe, filling his lungs with acrid, searing smoke. He tenses himself against the urge to cough, glaring defiantly over her head, his eyes welling with tears. Then, calmly handing back the pipe, he puffs out a perfect, redeeming smoke ring.

Don't inhale it, Freya says, poking a finger through the collapsing ring. *Drink it.*

They start across the icefield before dawn, carrying candle lanterns. Low cloud banks become visible after an hour. The greater expanse of the icefield is shrouded in leaden gloom.

The sky grows steadily lighter and then darkens again suddenly. The wind strengthens. Needle droplets of rain sting their faces.

He hears a note. A single high-pitched hum in the air near him. His ice-axe. He can feel the vibration through his wool gloves. He holds the axe up to examine it. Freya grabs it out of his hand, flings it away onto the snow.

Blue lightning pops like a camera flash overhead.

They crouch together as thunder booms. The electrified air crackles. Swiftly the stormcloud tumbles over the icefield, breaks against the mountain wall.

The sun appears through the thinning veil of cloud, a pale disc. For a moment Hal thinks it is the moon.

He imagines that days are passing as they trudge across the icefield. He finds himself filling the empty space with phantom figures that walk along with him, discussing politics and gardening.

Light bursts briefly through the cloud cover, so intense it feels like darkness, a negative of midnight. Hal watches Freya's shape recede ahead of him. Soon all he can see is the swaying rope that links him to her. For a moment he wonders who is really there at the other end of that rope. He stops.

She reappears after the slack runs out. Breathing hard, he mutters an excuse about the rope getting tangled. She smiles and says something encouraging it seems, although he cannot hear the words. He is suddenly weightless, light

enough to float up with the whirling snow into the white sky.

Do I love her? he wonders.

They walk in single file, the white expanse opening out as they move forward, growing in immensity the further they penetrate into it. There are no reliable landmarks in this sea of snow. Hummocks that appeared to be quite close recede into distant uplands.

They climb warily along a knife-edge ridge of snow. On either side the slope drops away for hundreds of feet into a gloomy cirque.

Most of the final pitch is on solid, forgiving snow into which they confidently dig their iceaxes and hobnail boots. They make good time, reaching the summit ridge at twelve-thirty. The space beyond this height is obliterated in blowing ice fog.

They embrace at the summit. A brief, formal clasp.

The space around them is enclosed in blowing snow, muffled, like a room. They make a cursory inspection of the cornice, squint through the field glasses in an unsuccessful

attempt to pick out the roofs of the town. The wind blows incessantly. They know they cannot stay very long.

Should we try the mirror, for Byrne? Hal asks.

Freya shakes her head. *There's no sun.*

Biscuits and coffee from a thermos bottle make up a quick summit meal.

While they eat, a gap is torn in the fog. Clouds shred away in the wind. The world is unveiled.

To the west lies the icefield. They turn away from its unrelieved blankness.

Far down the green valley is the town with its train station, church spires, town hall, peaked houses, hotel. All in miniature. Toy houses. Nearer, the red roof of the Hot Springs Chalet. Below it, the river's slender curve glitters through the trees.

Lovely, says Hal.

Some nearby peaks they can name by sight: Tekarra, Pyramid, Ammonite, Zebra, Roche Bonhomme, Sirdar. And closer to them Parnassus, Athabasca, Snow Dome.

Freya begins a contest, to describe the mountains gathered around them. *Fairytale cakes with icing. Olympian palaces. The heavenly host bright with all their crowns. Beethoven's Ninth, final movement. Frozen writing desks.* They give in to giddy laughter.

The mirror, Freya says suddenly. They make a hurried search of each other's pack.

Freya shakes her head impatiently.

Forget about that. She sets up the collapsible tripod and begins snapping pictures with her Panoram portable.

She wants to "kodak" Hal for posterity. He shrugs assent.

Step back, she says with a smile. *Way back now.*

At first he does not understand she is teasing him, so he glances behind to see how far he can safely step. When he turns again to share the joke, she is gone.

The summit cornice had collapsed.

He crawls to the broken edge, screams her name into the wind. A cloud of snow loosed by the fall obscures the drop.

He retraces their route down the ridge, then crawls away from the path of their boot prints onto the cliff face.

He descends methodically, working on each foot and hand hold. Talking to himself about his progress. After some time he realizes he is chanting aloud a meaningless litany.

The rock is frozen, the world is frozen, I am frozen.

He finds her in a gently sloping snow hollow. She is standing, brushing snow from her wool jacket, her hand

leaving a red smear. She looks vaguely perplexed, like someone who has misplaced her reading glasses.

I'm fine, she says when she is aware of his approach. *Just cold*.

He holds his scarf to the exposed white of her cheekbone. She sinks against him, light as falling snow. He carries her down the slope and onto the glacier. He feels her body against his as he staggers. She is very warm.

A fierce sun is urging the meltwater streams to life. The lake Byrne discovered is in existence on this day, a wide, calm pool, perfectly transparent.

He sets her down by the lake and looks into her open, sightless eyes.

In the evening he reaches Byrne's shelter. He tries to speak and breaks down. Byrne sits him in the chair and extracts the story. Together they take rope and blankets back up to the lake.

They wrap the body and carry it to the shelter, placing it gently on the stone floor. Byrne examines it briefly under the light of his spirit lamp.

We'll leave her here tonight and return with help tomorrow to bring her down.

For the first time, he closes the door of the shelter firmly behind him and blocks it up with several large stones.

The growth of an individual life is always attended with the following sequence: generation of heat; a rhythm in time which establishes an equilibrium of varying duration; an end which produces a glacial cold. I do not think that I am reaching beyond conclusicns that the facts will support, by a conjecture that with the earth things happened in the same manner.

Louis Agassiz 1837

Rowan brings Byrne two photographs, the remnants of Freya's film cartridge. The rest of the exposures were spoiled when the camera cracked during the fall.

The ice carapace of Mount Arcturus is the main subject of the first shot, the icefield below its summit a grey amoeboid blur to one side. The clerk in the camera shop explained to Hal that the glare of sunlight on the snow caused this effect.

Byrne's portrait also survived the fall. He finds himself frozen inside it. Her gift to him.

Grey peaked hat. Long mackintosh over a dark flannel shirt. Spectacles on a leather strap around his neck. Knee breeches, puttees, overshoes mottled with damp. Waterproof railway gloves in one hand, notebook in the other.

Prematurely white hair, thin white beard lining a long, bony face. Eyes slightly asiatic. Squint caused by sun glare on the spring snow at his feet. Lines at the corners of his eyes, his thin-lipped mouth.

The ice has been at work here too, scouring and chiseling.

In this version of the story she doesn't die. It would be too melodramatic. Too symbolic of something or other. Instead Rowan climbs down and finds her sitting by the ice lake with a picnic basket. The day is warm, aegean. They sit together under a turquoise heaven and laugh about his fears. They kiss.

Now they are together on the long train east. Newlyweds. They will live in his father's house. He will write. She will make excursions to Snowdon, to the lake district.

He climbs down from the summit and wanders across the penitent snow, her landscape. It is the only world left.

Elspeth watches Byrne come down the path to the glasshouse in his shirtsleeves, hatless, exuberant.

I saw a hummingbird out on the ice, he tells her excitedly. He describes its frantic hovering, as it searched a dead white world for flowers.

She knit Byrne a green wool pullover. He tries it on in the parlor, holds out his arms and turns to let her admire her work.

It's warm, he says.

That night he packs the sweater in his valise to take with him to London. He will wear it against the English damp.

The boy, Trask's son, is not interested in the gift shop. A customer mentions the new flying machines, built to make war in the skies. The boy runs outside impulsively and stares up at the peaks, livid in the rose light of sunset. To be able to soar to those heights.

He leaves home one day, unexpectedly, setting a short note and the bulk of his savings on the shop counter. A war has occurred at the opportune moment.

To his father he returns from a ruined world, a future of destruction. Byrne understands something more about the ice as a time machine when he sees Jim in his Royal Flying Corps uniform, direct from the Great War, having flown not over mountain passes and hidden valleys, but fortified towns, broken bridges, smoking fields.

The boy rides into town on the refrigerator car of the goods train, resting on a sawdust covered block of ice carved from the terminus of Arcturus Glacier. Around the block of ice are bags of freezing salt. Led by the local pipe band, the bearers take the boy from the train, up the street past his father's gift shop, to Father Buckler's new stone church on Turret Street, and past it to the cemetery.

The world war.

In Jasper some people talk of the war as though it is rumbling up the river valley toward them. They fearfully, longingly, imagine Jasper as the last bastion of the British Empire, defended in the final hour against the armoured Huns. Some discuss the feasibility of walling up the Athabasca valley. Dynamiting the cliffs at Disaster Point to build a wall of rock rubble where armed defenders would patrol and keep watchfires.

The ambrosia of English poetry, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Tennyson, is recited every Saturday evening at the town hall as a tonic.

Byrne does not come to Jasper that summer. Or the next.

German soldiers do come to Jasper, as prisoners. The idea is that little surveillance will be needed in a place where there is nothing to escape to. Given the choice, any sane man would stay behind the fences and barbed wire.

Much of the old town is still standing, half-submerged in the willow scrub. The buildings are renovated, to serve as the nucleus of a prisoner of war camp.

The German prisoners are enlisted to build a palace of ice blocks on Connaught Drive, for the winter carnival. The blocks are cut from the frozen Athabasca, hauled up by sledge to the town, chiseled into shape and sprayed with water to cement them in place. The plan is to build a scaled-down ice replica of the Taj Mahal.

It is to this palace that The Ice Princess, chosen by the Chamber of Commerce, will come at the end of her tour

through the town. There is one minor detail still to be worked out, however. How to keep the Princess from freezing to death in the thin silk costume they have designed for her.

A patriotic effusion of naming soon fills up the blank spaces on the map of Jasper National Park. Battlefields. Commanders. The heroes and the dead. La Montagne de la Grande Traverse is renamed Edith Cavell in honor of a heroic nurse shot by the enemy for helping wounded soldiers escape. Trask unveils the plaque at the base of the mountain.

In memory of those valiant young men and women who have gone on ahead to the Elysian fields.

Henry Charles Rowan comes back to Jasper, from the Great War, a witness of the battlefield of Passchendaele. He works for Trask again as a guide. Returning to the chalet like a sleepwalking horse on the loop trail back to the stable.

He has nightmares. There are complaints about his screams in the night.

A tourist from England, a wealthy businessman who wants to paint watercolor scenes, is his first client. He calls Hal his *equerry* and engages him in discussion about the great English poets.

They camp at night below the Ancient Wall, a sawtooth ridge that cuts black into the powder of the stars.

The tourist asks about Hal's poetry. Why hasn't he published another volume. There are those, Brooke, Sassoon, who have written of the war.

War is not a subject now, Hal answers. *It's a form.*

The tourist tells Hal that this wild mountain land is so unlike England's green and pleasant fields that he cannot believe it is part of the Empire. There are no ghosts in this empty new land, the tourist decides. Even the trees and flowers seem to be somehow less civilized than those in England. Less aware of history, perhaps. There is not much that is human about the place.

No, this is England, Hal says after a long silence. *This landscape is a frozen Englishman dreaming of heaven.*

The avant-garde composer Michel Barnaud arrives in Jasper in 1920 to give the one and only performance of his *"Mountain Impromptu."*

Eight local men are enlisted to haul a Wing and Sons piano up Mount Arcturus to the rocky outcrop known as the Stone Witch. Rowan is one of them. Barnaud's New York

patrons have paid them well to ensure that both composer and piano reach their destination intact. A reporter from the magazine *Dischord* is also on hand to record the event.

From the promontory there is a vertical drop of over one thousand feet into Avernus chasm.

Barnaud plays for one hour and eleven minutes on the windy precipice, then with the help of the carriers he pushes the piano over the lip of rock into the chasm for the closing crescendo.

There is a brief cacophony of chords as the piano tumbles end over end, and then a swiftly diminishing rumble. The piano's final demolition is too far below to send much sound back up the precipice. The composer leans forward and watches impassively as the shattered carcass of the piano slithers out of sight into the trees on the valley floor, trailing dust and tangled wire.

When informed that the site of his composition was also that of a recent climbing casualty, Barnaud is delighted. That night, townspeople with torches search the base of the col, looking to salvage some of the valuable materials from the wreckage.

Ivory keys have been found over the years alongside the Avernus trail. Often they are mistaken for the teeth of mammoths.

He takes off his shoes.

Five branches of the Arcturus meltwater stream flow from the glacier terminus. Byrne has named these channels for the five mental qualities of scholastic philosophy: Common Sense, Estimation, Memory, Imagination, Vision.

At this moment he is fording Memory, his feet naked in bone-cracking cold water.

The moon is quite large. Its surface is blank, unscarred. Perfectly white.

The air is unnaturally warm for this time of day, and carries a faint odor of ash.

There are no mountains.

The stream flowing into the wide expanse of water is wide and shallow, full of tidal creatures.

The sea is liquid amethyst. From its waves the mountains will rise. The forests will grow. The ice will come.

Don't wade too far out, he hears his mother's voice caution him.

High tide on Dublin bay.

Sometimes, late in the fall, the unnamed lake does not recede. I believe a subglacial ice dam builds up, and prevents the water from escaping. The lake then freezes over until the next spring.

Byrne takes Elspeth up to the glacier. They climb the lateral moraine and then strike out across the ice, roped together, Byrne hacking with his iceaxe every few steps.

They come to a space of level ice that Byrne has cleared of snow. This is the unnamed lake, its surface frozen, flat frozen, flat and unreflective.

While Byrne tests the ice surface, Elspeth explores.

Snow angel, she shouts to him.

Byrne drops one of his skates. *What did you say?*

I haven't made one of these since I was a child.

She sits up, reveals the winged impression she has left in the snow bank. He holds out a hand to her.

Please. You'll get wet and it'll be miserable up here for you.

They tie on their skates and, steadying each other, glide out onto the ice.

The temperature drops. They retreat to the hut on the nunatak.

Do you always do that? he asks.

What?

Touch the page with your fingers as you read.

She puts down the paper cover copy of *Wuthering Heights.* He is sitting on the hearthstone, setting out their

boots to dry. Elspeth's feet are soaking in a basin of hot water. The loose door of the shelter creaks in the wind.

You're right, she says. *I suppose I like the texture, the feel of the paper, the ink.*

His mouth creases in amusement. *You can sense the difference between print and the blank page?*

Well, I imagine that I can. It's half the pleasure of reading.

He has created a science, his own field of knowledge: the science of this one particular place on the earth. Arcturology.

I study the ice to find out what happened to me.

That is all he will say about his time in the crevasse. That is what he tells her. *I get bits and pieces.*

He returns from stoking the last embers of the fire, across the frozen floor on tiptoe as though over hot coals. He rubs his naked arms and chest, marvels at the brief phosphorecent glow of static that lights his fingertips. It must be caused by the dry air, the fine rock flour that settles imperceptibly, ceaselessly, on everything at this elevation.

He climbs between the cool sheets. She is somewhere beside him in the bed, already asleep, but he can't feel her warmth. He lies on his stomach, listening for her breathing.

At times she moves slightly. They are swimming side by side in a night lake, never touching. Only the waves of breathing tell of the other's presence.

Tomorrow he will leave again for England.

When he speaks with her, it seems he does not really see her. This whole town of living people is less real, less distinct to him than the moods of water, ice, clouds. In these moments he recedes into some prehistoric time when no human voice echoed among the rocks.

Trask perseveres in his lobbying of the park administration and is finally allowed to run motorized snow coaches onto Arcturus glacier.

The auto road up to the glacier that was begun by German prisoners has been completed, by men that the depression has left desperate for any paying work. Farmers, bank clerks, teachers.

Trask has saved the lumber from Sara's cabin. With it he builds a rustic information booth by the roadside, where motorists stop for postcards and refreshments.

Trask is cautiously optimistic. After bleak prospects, personal loss, a new field of possibilities is opening before him. He has heard of a new wave of explorers massing out there in the cities. Families in automobiles who will

glide through the mountains on smooth gleaming highways. Checking the names of glaciers in illustrated guidebooks. Gazing in awe at a world that is no longer invisible, no longer a blank space.

Rowan comes down the glacier on a warm afternoon, riding on a horse. At Byrne's shelter he dismounts, drops the reins.

The door is open, a half moon ridge of blown snow on the floor. Hal finds, tacked above the fireplace, Freya's portrait of Byrne. He scrapes the ashes in the fireplace and builds a pyre of stovewood. He searches for matches, gives up, sits on the floor in front of the cold hearth.

Byrne enters, bangs against the door in his haste. Rowan jumps up.

I didn't know you were back, doctor.

Byrne stabs a finger out the doorway.

The horse. Its hooves are down to the quick. He sees something in Rowan's eyes, looks away. *I followed the blood on the ice.*

Well, I crossed your icefield, Rowan says, sighing. *The guides have been saying it could be done, for years. Perhaps they were too much in awe of the place to try. I don't know what you think is up there, doctor, but I found nothing.*

Byrne rubs a hand through his hair, down the back of his neck.

You came down the icefall?

Rowan smiles. *On the winged horse of inspiration.*

Byrne breathes out slowly, pulls the chair out from the desk.

Please sit.

Rowan sits down, absently rubs his arms and legs.

You should've started a fire, Byrne says with forced lightness, *made yourself tea.*

I couldn't find any matches.

Byrne turns to him. *Ah, I forgot, that's my fault. They're hidden. Otherwise the climbers that stop here use them all up and I go without heat all night.*

He rubs his hands.

I'll boil some water.

Rowan nods. He watches Byrne's movements intently, takes a deep breath, locks his fingers together.

You were... with her.

Byrne freezes in the act of striking a match.

She came here that night, Rowan continues. *Before we left for the climb. I went to talk to her, it was late, and she wasn't in her tent. I didn't know why, then. But the reason came to me, just the other night.*

He laughs.

In a vision it came to me. I was lying on the ground looking at a billion stars. A damsel with a doctor in a

vision I once saw. Only one must assume there was nothing poetic about it.

Byrne patiently nurses the fire into life. He turns to glance at Rowan's shadowed face.

She frightened you, too, Rowan says quietly. *But now we're safe. She can't get under our skin any more, right, doctor? Now and for the rest of our days, we can quietly contemplate Our Lady of the Ice.*

Blue shadows are drinking up the world. Byrne advises Rowan to stay the night in the shelter. It is too late to descend the glacier. Rowan shakes his head. He walks, leading the exhausted horse.

When he reaches the till plain, its flat stillness seems familiar, an aftermath:

The battle was over. The guns had stopped.

His column was given the order to move. They loaded the mules that carried the ammunition and advanced. The way forward from the salient took them across the mud and debris of no man's land, to the edge of the ruined village. This had once been a cultivated field. Now it was a ghost world of churned up earth, white bodies half-submerged, metallic wreckage. The soldiers rubbed their chilled hands over any burst shells that still radiated heat.

The world was quiet and peaceful. A silence he stepped across in terror, waiting for it to explode.

Four days later Trask calls Byrne to his office at the chalet. Rowan is there, looking scrubbed, rejuvenated. As if camp smoke and saddle leather have never touched him.

He surrenders himself to the doctor's care. On the way to the hospital he halts, laughs at a sudden revelation.

My God. The poetry I'll be able to write now.

He was missing for three days, then appeared in the streets. Stepped into Trask's office, in the suit he wore the day he first arrived in Jasper.

Good heavens, son, Trask said. *Are you getting married?*

Rowan stood stiffly by the door.

I won't be able to continue in your employ, Mr Trask. The reason, to be perfectly honest, is that I'm cracking up.

Terminus

The terminus of the glacier is an instructive place, a landscape of metamorphosis. Ceaselessly changing, and yet always the same, like the seashore. Ice streams becoming rivers, mountains wearing down into plains.

The transition zone between two worlds.

A black bear, chained to a post at the golf course. Bing Crosby, on a visit to this mountain paradise, poses with Fred the Bear. In the photograph's frame the placid fairway runs level behind them, bordered by a row of pines. Trask, who arranged this tableau, is a truncated arm and hat brim to one side.

Bing, in straw hat and tweed golf togs, leans on his pitching wedge and eyes Fred askance. Bing is well aware of the comic incongruity. He knows just what pose to strike for the camera.

Fred stands upright on his hind legs, the chain taut behind him. He holds his front paws out, as if reaching tentatively for Bing. His eyes cannot be seen in the photograph. He does not know that his image is being

captured, frozen onto film, and consequently he looks a little blurred, as though his innocence of the camera keeps him slightly out of focus.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to cross the gap, to say what his awkward straining posture conveys. No human emotion seems quite adequate to describe the gesture of the animal.

The ice has receded so much that it now takes Byrne a full two days on horseback to reach the glacier.

Down on the till plain, Trask has built a bus terminal. It will house a new glacier diorama, a cafeteria selling hot food and drink, and perhaps water from the mineral spring can be piped in for a sauna. The exterior will have an igloo-style facade to go along with the "little Arctic" motif of his other exhibits.

A sunny pleasure dome with caves of ice!

He wonders if it might be possible to import penguins to swim in the melt pool at the terminus. Of course their wings would have to be clipped. And in winter, there could be hockey games right on the ice.

Next summer, he is confident, will see tourists riding these buses to the terminus of Arcturus glacier.

I see it: that space of clarity and pure delight. I see it just for a moment, beyond the dark scattered debris.

Byrne dreams the last tourist. Taken up in a gleaming silver airplane to view the icefield.

They follow the white ribbon of the superhighway. Up the Athabasca valley to the zone of ice and rock.

The tourist scans the earth for the familiar topography of the Arcturus glacier, but sees only trodden moraines and collapsed bridges.

The airplane soars effortlessly over the castellated rim of the retaining wall. The passenger winces, shielding his eyes against the expected glare of sunlight on ice.

There is no glare. No ice. A bowl of dark bare rock opens below him. At the bottom of this empty amphitheatre are several small blue grey tarns, ringed by dirty mounds of slush.

He cranes his neck, searching for the immaculate blue glimmer. The pilot, an impassive genie behind mirrored sunglasses, responds to his unspoken thoughts and tips the airplane earthward. The winged shadow they cast leaps ahead of them over boulders, skips across the surface of the tiny lakes.

Drainage streams emerging at several points along the terminus unite in a powerful torrent which cuts off the

southeasterly side of the valley and prevents access to the surface of the ice except at the extreme right. Apparently the tongue no longer produces a terminal ice cave or arch.

There are those who desire the icefields to be everywhere, to make the text of civilization a blank page, to cover every peak, to bring oceans and time to fullness and absolute zero.

Byrne is not one of these. He knows that the icefields will always be besieged, receding, their true extent guessed at, feared, desired.

Snow falls on the hot spring pool. Huge stalactite icicles hang from the eaves. A thick coat of hoarfrost covers the roof of the chalet. The snow falls out of a white enclosing space that surrounds the dark water. The flakes appear for a moment against the pool's wavering surface, and disappear again into the water.

A crown of snow forms on Byrne's head as he sits in the pool. Cold rivulets slide from it down his neck and along his shoulders. He submerges momentarily and the crown is gone. The white world beyond his breath is not real. It melts away.

Elspeth watches him from the lounge beside the pool. The steam gradually clouds up the window and obliterates him from her view.

Byrne unpacks his old notebooks, goes over his calculations. If he is correct, the ice that had surrounded him in the crevasse at the end of the last century has finally made its way to the terminus.

In confirmation of this, a tooth-shaped erratic that Byrne had painted during his ice velocity calculations now sits on the edge of the terminal slope. The paint on the rock has weathered away to orange flecks resembling lichen growth. Another day of melt brings it tumbling down onto the till plain.

He never finishes a sentence. Talking with Elspeth, his words drift away, almost inaudible.

He spends each day at the terminus, prowling through the muck and slush. Nothing. The glacier cracks, crumbles, sloughs off fragments of itself.

For the first time in years he comes down with a severe cold and retreats to the chalet. Sits in the tea house watching the glacier through field glasses.

The poplars in the valley snow gold.

He postpones his return to England longer than ever before. An early snowstorm obliterates the distinction between the glacier and the rest of the valley. When Byrne finally gives in, Elspeth refuses to accompany him to the station.

The following spring when he returns to Jasper, Elspeth is gone. She accepted a managing position at the celebrated Empress Hotel in Victoria.

Byrne takes his usual room at the chalet.

The terminus reveals nothing. The summer passes. Byrne returns to England.

He will try again next year.

The dark mud at the glacier terminus has a consistency similar to quicksand. You step carefully from one exposed rock surface to another, trying to avoid setting foot in the grey muck that will swallow up man or horse.

The ice here seems little more than a thin carapace over an underworld of churned muck and rock.

Lost a boot here yesterday. Chalet guests amused by man with one bare foot limping down the path.

The next two summers yield nothing.

Now Byrne passes people on the streets of Jasper that he has never met before. And they do not know him. Sometimes when he comes down from the glacier, to the warm and tree-lined boulevard, the faces that pass him are all unknown. He hears bits of conversations in foreign languages. He finds old wooden shop fronts refurbished with bright awnings, lit with neon flutings, a novelty, windows of restaurants and gift shops painted with new and unfamiliar names. He wonders if somehow he lost his way and wandered unwittingly over a pass into another town, in some more prosperous valley.

Time slips away from him, taking a familiar world with it. He tries to hold it in his hands and it sublimates into vapor.

Lying in his room at the chalet, he hears once again that ancient sea. The sound washes him up into consciousness. He rises stiffly and goes out into the morning light. Automobiles rush along the new highway, the sound of their approach and passing like the ebb and flow of waves.

In this ice age, time is no longer linear, it expands and contracts, rewriting the surface of the world over and over.

The next year Byrne is invited to the opening ceremony of the Glacier Tour. The twentieth of June. Spring warmth has scarcely touched the Arcturus valley.

Trask is present to welcome everyone, townsfolk, tourists, visiting dignitaries. He stands before the gates of the bus terminal, conscious of the majestic spectacle of shining ice that forms a backdrop to his speech of welcome.

The cavalcade makes its progress in motorcoaches from the chalet to the staging area near the glacier. Byrne sits next to a Japanese alpinist, a climber from the recent expedition to the summit of remote Mount Alberta. The story in town has it that the Japanese left a silver ice axe at the top in honor of their emperor.

The shaking of the motorcoach as it crawls laboriously across the till plain makes the two men bump shoulders. They turn and smile at one another.

The alpinist introduces himself with brisk formality. *Allow me to break the ice, as you say in English.*

His name is Kagami. His hand, when Byrne shakes it, is warm and dry. He understands that Byrne is an expert on the glaciers of the region.

I myself, he says quietly, *have a keen interest in glacial dynamics. Perhaps too keen. I once spent a night in a crevasse, on the Mer de Glace of Mont Blanc. Purely out of scientific curiosity.* He smiles, adjusts the glasses on his nose. *A foolhardy thing to do.*

Byrne nods his agreement, then, after a moment, asks, *So what was it like, in the crevasse?*

Cold, says Kagami. To his own surprise, Byrne finds himself laughing.

The motorcoach stops with a jolt. They have arrived at the terminus.

Trask's ice vehicle has a military look. A rectangular metal exterior, tank treads and a sliding panel in the roof where one can stand with binoculars or camera.

The driver wears a dark blue uniform with a silver Pegasus badge on his cap.

On the staging platform Trask gives another short speech, cautioning everyone to remain on the platform until it is time to board. First the interpreter will tell them about what they will see on the glacier. And what safety precautions to take if they leave the vehicle, at their own risk, and venture out onto the ice. The nervous interpreter steps forward, steers an inquisitive child away from the no man's land of the terminus. He claps his hands briskly twice, blushes, and begins his lecture.

If you'll look to the left there, above the terminal roof....

Byrne slips away. It must be his drab clothes, he thinks, that camouflage him from the keen-eyed young interpreter. He blends in with the rocks.

He taps his alpenstock ahead of him like an ice axe, wary of the slippery fresh snow capping the boulders. It is his first visit to the terminus this season. Perhaps too early, but he could not pass up the opportunity to explore.

He hears the gurgle of newly released water underneath the plaque of ice on the streams. Away from the crowd, in the chill air, he can imagine the cold ice water running through his veins, invigorating him.

A tiny mote of colour appears amid the grey rubble at his feet. He kneels in the cold muck. Peeking out between the halves of a shattered stele of limestone, a tiny purple-pink flower. *Orchidaceae*. The petals tremble in the icy wind.

He takes out his magnifying glass, notes sexual characteristics, number of petals, the basal leaves. There can be no doubt. *Calypso bulbosa*. The calypso orchid or Venus slipper.

His scientific understanding contracts. Orchids do not grow here. Nothing grows here. The collision of ice and rock grinds away all life. Nothing can survive at the terminus.

Byrne gently nudges aside shards of rock, exposes the stem of the orchid. His fingers probe into the cold grit flecked with splinters of ice, slide along a straight edge. He scrapes away further and exposes the dull glint of grey metal. The dented remains of a tin specimen box.

When he returns to the staging area, the crowd is lining up to board the ice coach. One of the guests asks the interpreter how long it took to pile all those rocks alongside the glacier.

No, that's natural, the interpreter says, smiling patiently. *It's a moraine. As I mentioned, the ice did all that work.*

Byrne steps up close to the Japanese climber.

Come with me, he says in a soft voice, glancing apprehensively at the crowd with its panoply of cameras. *I want to show you something rather extraordinary.*

Appendices

These additional materials are placed outside the main stream of the narrative to allow for easier reference.

SYMBOLOGY of the ICEFIELD: a quick checklist

Colors: blue, white, grey

Arts: architecture, sculpture, music

Hour: crepuscular

Techniques: science, sublimation

Senses: vision, touch

Organs: skin, lungs, skeletal structure

Elements: hydrogen, oxygen, carbon

Artifacts: glass, porcelain, bone, paper

Instruments: magnifying glass, scalpel, ice axe

Virtues: patience, chastity, simplicity

Vices: forgetfulness, materiality

Contraries: fecundity, blood, passion

Planets: Mercury, Pluto

Age: Holocene

ERRATICS:

To create a unified and accessible guidebook, it is often necessary to remove entries that seem incomplete, out of place, or misleading. Two such fragments are included here, for the reader who wishes to travel a little further into the glacial landscape:

1. A name for the woman. Rose. Blackbird. Some kind of flower. Kala. Sita. Opposite of yellow head. Blackfoot? Seraphine. Sarasvati: Hindu goddess of speech.

2. He turned away from the ice. Went out into the lush, inviting garden. She was there, wearing her new spring dress.

I love you, he said.

SUGGESTIONS for FURTHER READING

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NOTES